

Niesporek-Szamburska / Wójcik-Dudek / Ochwat (eds.)

Polish Flows

An Aqua-critical Reading of Cultural and Educational Narratives about Rivers





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Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska /
Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek /
Magdalena Ochwat (eds.)

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An Aqua-critical Reading of Cultural and
Educational Narratives about Rivers

With 5 figures

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To Rivers

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Introduction

Encompassing cultural maritime studies and cultural water studies focused on the water element as such and on its ubiquity, the blue humanities include aquacritical research, which seeks to revise the entrenched notions of water and highlight the key role of the water ecosystem in establishing and sustaining communication between humans and non-humans. The contributors to this volume go a step further and propose not only theoretical reflection on the ways of promoting such relations, but also practical ideas about how they can be fostered as part of humanities education in Polish schools.

Our interest in water-focused environmental education is fueled by two major developments. One of them is the exacerbation of water pollution, a problem that became acutely evident in the wake of the 2022 Oder environmental disaster. The other is a heated debate, unfolding of late in scholarship, politics, and civil protests (marches, happenings, etc.) and powered, among other factors, by seminal recent publications (e.g., Jan Mencwel's *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* [A Hydro-Mystery: Who Takes away Polish Water and How to Reclaim It], Szymon Opryszek's *Woda. Historia pewnego porwania* [Water: A Story of a Kidnapping], Maciej Robert's *Rzeki, których nie ma* [Rivers That Are Not], and Andrzej Chwalba's *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* [The Vistula: A Biography of the River]) and documentaries, such as Dyba Lach's *Przynoszę ci dzikość* [Sowing the Seeds of the Wild] and Ewa Ewart's award-winning *Do ostatniej kropli* [Until the Last Drop].

For this reason a team of researchers affiliated to the Interdisciplinary Center for Research on Humanistic Education (Interdyscyplinarne Centrum Badań nad Edukacją Humanistyczną, ICBEH) at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, launched a project to explore Polish waters as assemblages of artificial and natural forces, where the natural, the cultural, the human, the non-human, the social, and the material are framed in scientific, political, social, and ecological narratives. These narratives affect reflection on water in Polish education.

To explore the formative impact of such narratives on humanities education is a goal pursued in and through a range of projects on and efforts for humanistic

climate-and-environmental education undertaken by the ICBEH. Among these activities, *The V4 Humanities Education for the Climate: Diagnoses—Best Practices—Recommendations* (HEC) was one of our key enterprises. Supported by the International Visegrad Fund and involving extensive research, the international project was implemented between 2020 and 2023 in collaboration with the ICBEH partners from the V4 countries: Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia), Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia), *Palacký University* in Olomouc (the Czech Republic), and the National Polish School in Budapest (Hungary). The outcomes of this venture included recommendations regarding university- and school-based humanities education for the climate,¹ a repository of research and teaching resources,² and a book titled *The V4 Humanities Education for the Climate. Diagnoses—Best Practices—Recommendations*.³

Our team is committed to combining research on humanities education for the climate and the environment with practical educational work. One way to accomplish this is by engaging in local artistic events and activities popularizing climate-environmental education. For example, during the Silesian Science Festival in Katowice in 2022, we arranged an educational station where children and young adults could haptically experience coal. Also, we ran what we called the Educational Carbonarium (workshops for pre-school, secondary-school, and university students) as part of the *Underground: Subterra Incognita* show at the BWA Contemporary Art Gallery in Katowice, curated by Marta Tomczok, Paweł Tomczok, Paweł Szeibel, and Grzegorz Hańderek.

In order to share our experience in education for the climate and the environment, we organize meetings with teachers, hold discussion panels with educators, students, and officials from institutions involved with education, and teach lessons at schools. All this work has gone into “Tak dla Klimatu” [“Yes to Climate”], a new course we collaboratively developed with our colleague Justyna Hanna Budzik for the students of the University of Silesia and into a model of education for the climate and the environment which is currently being launched in Katowice’s primary schools.

1 https://www.hec.us.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/HEC_rekomendacje_PL-1.pdf [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

2 For the recordings of the international conferences and teaching resources (e. g., lesson plans), see <https://www.hec.platforma.us.edu.pl> [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

3 Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska, Maria Waclawek, and Zuzana Obertová, eds. (in collaboration with Ivana Dobrotová and Anita Račáková), *Edukacja humanistyczna V4 dla klimatu. Rozpoznania – dobre praktyki – rekomendacje. The V4 Humanities Education for the Climate. Diagnoses – Best Practices – Recommendations* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023), https://wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/sites/wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/files/wus_2023_niesporek-szamburska_waclawek_obertova_educacja_humanistyczna_ebook.pdf [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

Our research has obtained visibility and received an additional boost from the conferences we have convened: the international *GEologos* conference in June 2022⁴ and the nationwide conference on *Mały antropocen. Rola literatury dla dzieci i młodzieży w zielonej edukacji humanistycznej* [*The Young Anthropocene: The Role of Children's and Young Adult Literature in Green Humanities Education*].⁵ Besides, a research project carried out by Magdalena Ochwat and Anna Guza, who investigated the attitudes of school and university students, Polish teachers, and parents to climate issues, yielded four extensive reports.⁶

In *Polish Flows: An Aqua-critical Reading of Cultural and Educational Narratives about Rivers*, we are joined by Anna Barcz, an eminent aqua-critical researcher, and Małgorzata Lebda, an award-winning writer and researcher dedicated to the amelioration of the difficult situation of rivers in Poland, in examining the traditional narratives of water enshrined in the Polish education system in order to make a case for change in the public's attitudes and for practicing responsibility for and toward rivers. To this end, we explore the river as a community that forms the ecosystem of a given area and comprises various actors of the waterworld. Our book's interdisciplinary inquiry into this world is made possible by the multiplicity of viewpoints adopted by the contributors, who are literature scholars, culture researchers, linguists, biologists, language education specialists, and psychologists and combine aqua-critical research with the bodily experience of the river, as notably exemplified by Małgorzata Lebda, who ran 1,113 km along the Vistula in 2021.

In this volume, we recount the Polish myth-making narratives about rivers (the Vistula, the Oder, and the Niemen) and offer their critical re-reading in order to develop new educational practices that face up to our 21st-century conjuncture, stamped by climate disaster, as it is, and embrace future-oriented ways of thinking of rivers in other terms than utility and symbolism.

Our book will be of interest to varied readerships, including blue and environmental humanities scholars, didactics specialists, and simply people who care about the transformation and dissemination of eco-awareness in Poland. The conclusions the authors offer may serve as good practices in European ecological and environmental discourses.

Anna Barcz's opening article provides an introductory overview of the issues in and contexts of ecological education practices in Poland, with a focus on the water legacy. Barcz seeks to identify the texts and curricular content that underpin today's school-based discussions of hydro-ecological challenges and to establish in what ways and to what degree the school prepares young Poles for

4 See <https://geologos.us.edu.pl> [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

5 See <https://www.icbeh.us.edu.pl> [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

6 See <https://www.icbeh.us.edu.pl> [accessed 2. 12. 2023].

grappling with Poland's real problems—drought and decrease in water resources.

Małgorzata Lebda examines various ways of writing (about) rivers. She particularly attends to literary depictions that exhibit the river-as-an-organism perspective, where rivers are understood as beings. Lebda believes it is possible to construct river-oriented narratives accommodating the needs of rivers and argues that the idiom of literature precedes and outruns the language of science and the media and that, as such, it should be an object of educational reflection.

In a similar vein, Magdalena Ochwat and Piotr Skubała dwell on the Oder as an illustration of the condition of Polish rivers and call for granting the legal person status to rivers. Ochwat and Skubała recount how the disaster of the “not-quite-tamed” Oder prompted a mass response of the Polish public, mobilizing the citizens around the movement for rivers and triggering a U-turn in social attitudes to them. They insist that a corresponding change should happen in education as well.

The two following papers make good on this call and propose interdisciplinary (re)readings of two novels which, having long been mandatory school texts, are intimately familiar to Polish students. Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek offers an eco-reading of Bolesław Prus' *The Doll* “filtered” through Chubby Kate, that is, the Warsaw water intake, and ushers in the perspective of the collaborative intertwining of the human and the non-human as a brand-new approach in the cultural narratives of the Vistula. Karolina Starnawska's (re)reading of *On the Niemen* by Eliza Orzeszkowa weaves together ecological concerns related to water stress and social contexts illuminating the traditional roles ascribed to women in Polish society.

In her contribution, Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska uses a linguistic lens to inspect folktales, legends, and myths included in Polish language and literature textbooks. She interprets the functions and images of aquatic objects, especially of the sea, together with the axiological meanings invested in them, to distil the image of *water* as produced by the literary passages compiled in textbooks and to capture what aqua-critical message, if any, these literary nuggets present to young readers today.

The subsequent three articles discuss water-related issues in teaching Polish as a foreign language (PFL). Alina Mitek-Dziemba calls for the “return of the elements” in PFL classrooms as a means of both re-orienting foreign language teaching and learning toward a more eco-critical agenda and of rediscovering what seems to be the environmental and multi-species history underlying the construction of national identity in society. The paper authored by Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron and Ewa Półtorak reports how the Vistula River and its cultural legacy are depicted in educational materials for teaching Polish as a foreign language and provides suggestions for capitalizing on the cultural potential of water and water-themed cultural and artistic events as a basis for teaching and

educational activities. In her article, Maria Waclawek encourages incorporating the development of ecological awareness and intelligence into PFL coursework. She marshals a range of commercial advertisements that feature water/river motifs and discusses their application in the PFL classroom with a view to both improving language skills and fostering responsible consumer attitudes.

Anna Guza's paper surveys the therapeutic properties of water and offers suggestions as to how teachers, educators, and culture amateurs can tap into the local hydrological potential in their teaching, psycho-educational, and therapeutic work.

Concluding the volume is Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek's interview with Małgorzata Lebda, a writer, researcher, columnist, ultramarathon runner, mountaineer, and photographer, who ran the entire length of the Vistula, Poland's largest river, to draw the public's attention to the destruction of rivers. In the interview, Lebda talks of the embodied experience of rivers and educational practices capable of promoting this kind of relationship with the river.

Feel free to **dive into** this book and explore it **in-depth**.

Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska
Magdalena Ochwat
Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

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Aquatic Poland in Humanities Education: Gaps and Challenges

Intro: environmental education (in Poland)

Environmental education is not only a vast academic field but a task to do. Contemporary Poland, which I intentionally put in brackets, exemplifies it particularly well. Brackets mean here that we are dealing with a model of a country with history and culture that affect the educational politics and ecological awareness more—or differently—than the other countries which did not go through the experience of partitions or extreme border transformations, two World Wars, and communism. In result, Poland has been struggling with a deep social crisis of trust¹ and like other countries with the history of being colonised and suppressed by “greater” nations reacts with frustrated nationalism.² These factors have not been considered so far as useful to understand why the state does not prioritise environment, climate or water scarcity in the educational politics designed for the future generations.³

Setting up the goals of Polish education in other areas than the key global challenges indicated by the main international organizations to which Poland is attached, such as United Nations⁴ or European Union,⁵ is mirrored by other countries in the region as well. One of the research projects conducted at the

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1 Justyna Osiecka-Chojnacka, “Zaufanie jako fundament społeczeństwa obywatelskiego – wyzwania dla polskiego szkolnictwa,” *Studia BAS* 2015, nr 4 (44), pp. 87–121.

2 Timothy K. Wilson, “Irish/Polish Nationalism and Violence,” in *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edn., 2010).

3 An important note: I am finishing this article after the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland. Since the ruling for eight years right wing and Eurosceptic party, Law and Justice, lost its majority, we might expect in 2024 some changes in the core curriculum.

4 See the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals website: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs> [accessed 26.02.2024].

5 See the European Commission Education Area on topics in focus – Green Education website: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/green-education> [accessed 26.02.2024].

Silesian University in Poland with other Visegrad countries showed how humanities are underrepresented in the climate education.⁶ Coming back to Poland and analysing all the fundamental documents issued by the Polish government, i.e. the core curriculum for humanities—I am particularly interested in the secondary and high school agenda—brings me already to a conclusion that the main aim of Polish education is to get students to learn about Polish heritage. Polish language education is part of this “patriotic” goal but a question why a contemporary Pole needs to identify as a Pole, what kind of adaptation and survival skills the knowledge of your (national and regional) heritage offer, how can it be opened to accommodate new questions (that our curious and climate rebellious youngsters could ask), what critical and important issues on ecological crisis this heritage can raise? These aspects are not accentuated or even prioritised. On the contrary, despite the UN and EU green, blue or even red agenda, one of the key goals of humanities education in Poland is to preserve and praise the respect towards the human, I am reading on a website,⁷ as if the anthropocentric culture was the greatest achievement of all the times with all the infrastructure destroying life on Earth.⁸ And don’t understand me wrong—it is so powerfully addressed by the intersectionality theory that racism and all kinds of oppression toward humans intersect with ecological violence and suppression of non-human world.⁹ In her commentary text to the core curriculum in Poland, one acclaimed literary scholar noticed that reformers usually do not ask what kind of profile of a person we want to mould but they reform the education system with ready-made assumptions about values and ideas on the Polish heritage,¹⁰ as if the canon cannot be questioned or it could not trigger new directions. Even such conservative literary critic, like Harold Bloom, believed that if we trust the canon, it will generate new answers because there is something like the autonomy of the aesthetic that sources our wisdom.¹¹

For history, it will be explained that Polish heritage is not “external” but students need to know how they are formed by their heritage and how they

6 See the report with recommendations at V4 Humanities Education for the Climate website, 2023: <https://www.hec.us.edu.pl/recommendations> [accessed 8.01.2024].

7 A reprint of the Minister of Education’s decree from the 30 January 2018 is available here: <https://podstawaprogramowa.pl/Liceum-technikum> [accessed 26.02.2024].

8 Magdalena Ochwat, “Edukacja polonistyczna wobec kryzysu klimatycznego – rozpoznania i rekomendacje dydaktyczne,” *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio N – Educatio Nova* 2020, vol. 5, pp. 185–204, <https://doi.org/10.17951/en.2020.5.185-204>.

9 See, e.g., Eli Clare, “Mediations on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 204–218.

10 Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, “Uwagi o nauczaniu przedmiotu ‘język Polski’ w dzisiejszej szkole,” *Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa im. Adama Mickiewicza* 2010, R. III (XLV), p. 178.

11 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

should be responsible for taking care of it. Polish heritage and Polishness are presented as facts to be learned as undisputable truth.¹² There is nothing about environmental culture or critical approach to the polluting heritage understood as a source of identity. How paradoxical, though, if we teach history in line with the Latin maxim: *historia magistrae vitae*. And nothing comes later, within the section on social education, what is defined as “bonum commune” is only about humans and their anthropocentric communities.¹³ However, debating on energetic transformation is mentioned in the listed topics within “the Poland’s foreign policy after 1989”¹⁴ and followed by understanding the European climate politics with its consequences on European citizens.¹⁵ Still, these examples are definitely unsatisfactory to meet the EU’s and the UN’ standards. After reading and analysing the official Polish documents that frame and define the schools’ curricula, I am surprised how according to the UN we received such high indicators (0,802/1/1/0,9 in the scale 0.000–1) for the “Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment.”¹⁶ The only content in the current curriculum, which I can directly relate to environmental education, I found in the introductory passage to the so-called “core curriculum” addressed to all school subjects: “The school is committed to educating young people in a spirit of acceptance and respect for other people, fostering an attitude of respect for the natural environment, motivating action to protect the environment and developing an interest in ecology.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, without developing a critical approach to the anthropocentrically framed education in Poland, and without undermining the patriotic and heroic corset put especially tight on humanities, we will not be able to respond to the environmental challenges and take part in the international (planetary) activism to restore and regenerate the biosphere—the source of all life.

12 Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki z dnia 8 marca 2022 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie podstawy programowej kształcenia ogólnego dla liceum ogólnokształcącego, technikum oraz branżowej szkoły II stopnia, Dz.U. 2022, poz. 622, p. 2, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20220000622/O/D20220622.pdf> [accessed 26.02.2024].

13 Rozporządzenie, p. 30.

14 Rozporządzenie, p. 34.

15 Rozporządzenie, p. 35.

16 UNSD Website, data per country: https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/undatacommons/sdgs/countries?p=country%2FPOL&v=dc%2Ftopic%2Fsdg_13 [accessed 26.02.2024].

17 A reprint, <https://podstawaoprogramowa.pl/Liceum-technikum> [accessed 26.02.2024] [translation – A.B.].

I Water heritage in the aquacritical perspective

Blue humanities focused on water heritage in various critical approaches and disciplines provide contemporary societies with relevant and urgent questions that we want to ask our textbooks to investigate further what the sources of aquaculture are in use in Polish schools. Aquacriticism is therefore a specified position to be applied to water-related sources, which means that by assigning a special cultural attention to water bodies or water-related environments, such as wetlands, the sources can “speak” on their behalf more than on other praised environments in Eastern and Central European cultures, such as forests or mountains. By doing this, aquacriticism intentionally accentuates the scarcity of water and redirects investigations towards water commodifying discourse in alliance with restoration ecology and historical evidence, for instance in the context of infrastructurally “silenced rivers.”¹⁸ Still, aquacriticism belongs to the area of ecocritical studies and does not break with the main assumption of ecological thinking that is advocated there, i.e. on the entangled environments and human/nonhuman interconnected bionetworks of life.¹⁹ Even on the contrary, it is indebted in the theoretical language of ecocriticism, which has been growing exponentially with the environmental and climate crisis.²⁰ By intersecting with other theories, e.g. new materialism,²¹ aquacriticism addresses the agential role of water environments (and elements like water)²² to refocus educational goals on preparing future citizens how to respond to risks and challenges that will arise from the side of aquatic bodies, like river floods and rising sea levels, but also how to act with other aquatic agents or even—how to learn from them.²³

18 For example by the large dams in: Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

19 Glen Love, *Practical Ecocriticism. Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

20 Jason M. Kelly et al., eds., *Rivers of the Anthropocene* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018); Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 9, 24, 38.

21 Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*, pp. 1–17.

22 See for example “an environmental agentism” in: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds., *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 6.

23 Jeroen Warner, “Space for the river,” in *Water, Cultural Diversity, and Global Environmental Change: Emerging Trends, Sustainable Futures?*, eds. Barbara Rose Johnston et al. (Dordrecht and Paris: Springer, 2012), pp. 54–59; Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

Because of the history/memory component, aquacriticism also differs from “hydro-critical” or “hydropoetical” positions.²⁴ Both prefixes, “hydro” and “aqua,” means water but “hydro” signifies slightly more scientific approach, whereas “aqua” responds more adequately to the complex reflection on the disequilibrium between the environmental and cultural presence of water that primarily humanities can and should bring into environmental education to critically explore societal relations with water bodies (through literary, historical, archaeological, artistic or ethnographic sources). Specifically in Poland, our vast water heritage has not been yet read through historical and cultural memory studies on which we will put an aquacritical filter. We had the so-called “Swedish Deluge” in the 17th century where the Vistula River was used in these rapid and aggressive campaigns to invade Poland. Painful river blood poetics flows through Polish poetry since the Tatars aggression in the 13th century (*Druga Pieśń Sandomierzanina*)²⁵ to Krzysztof Baczyński’s WWII poems (e.g. *The River Ballad* from 1941). All these events consider real water bodies where metaphors gain life and lose symbolic construction according to an ecocritic Serpil Oppermann.²⁶ However, the fluvial or any other aquatic archives have not been interpreted and educated as part of Polish difficult water heritage, which can positively affect environmental education and reframe our knowledge on the past to recognize the aquatic actors’ role (vulnerable and resilient) in the course of military and conflicted human societies’ history outside of the anthropocentric, patriarchal and nationalistic narrative.

II Blue contents in textbooks and challenges

To develop such an alternative in the aquacritical approach to environmental education in Poland on the basis of water representation in humanities textbooks, I discuss here a few major examples found in the history textbooks for high and secondary schools in Poland. The aquacritical perspective guides me through their contents, which means I am interested in finding how are ecological concerns communicated through cultural and historical depictions of water bodies across different traditions and periods. Is there a link with the current hydroecological knowledge? Is water valued as a scarce ecological entity?

24 Laura Winkiel, “Hydro-criticism,” a special issue of *English Language Notes* 2019, vol. 57, no. 1; John Charles Ryan, “Hydropoetics: The rewor(l)ding of rivers,” *River Research and Applications* 2022, vol. 38 no. 3, pp. 486–493, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rra.3844>.

25 See Teresa Michałowska, *Literatura polskiego średniowiecza. Leksykon* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2011), p. 502.

26 Serpil Oppermann, “Storied Seas and Living Metaphors in the Blue Humanities,” *Configurations* 2019, vol. 27 no. 4, pp. 443–461, <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2019.0030>.

Are textbooks informed by water restoration ecology and environmental history? Can a student find information on how people coped with the elemental nature of waters and negotiated their space in the past landscape?

In the textbook *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1* [*Understanding the Past 1*],²⁷ which is an example of the extended version of a textbook to teach history Polish teenagers, all information about the roots of our civilizations located at the greatest rivers is devoted to this grand anthropocentric narrative of humans colonizing their environments. Not only Mesopotamians and ancient Egyptians conquer water, treating it from the beginning as a mere resource, but also the same story repeats in other parts of the world, like the Indus Valley. What we learn about this river, for example, we hear that the Indus was one of the communication routes only.²⁸ Therefore, at the beginning of human history and in how it is reconstructed, a young adult hears how the greatest rivers like the Nile, Tiger and Indus *were used and commodified* but there is nothing about the river in itself, nothing about the environment and riparian landscapes transformed by humans, nothing about the challenges, like floods and droughts, in human-river relations. This model of reconstructing the global roots of civilizations—roots that are fundamental for understanding modern humanity and its death drive²⁹—tells us also that no alternative stories to humans controlling nature are offered, that there is even no question or fissure to open a space for critical thinking, unless a creative teacher or student rebels. Such truly eco-didactic rebel could lead, for example, to queries how and why did people disconnect from their major, powerful streams? What were the cultural and political factors that helped to devoid the rivers from their agential role? What made humans to believe that we can border human civilization from water element? Was it the development of hydro-infrastructure in the flood-prone areas? And why there is nothing about how floods and human-river cooperative practices developed more sustainable models of agriculture? Why and when people finally discovered that they must anchor the aquacritical perspective in reference to the oldest civilizations that were built on the irrigation systems damaging the whole water circulation system? The textbook also says that the fall of the Indus civilization was probably partly caused by the river floods, “from which even the system of canals could not protect.”³⁰ Indeed, even now and especially now—in the time of climate warming and dysregulated water circulation systems—there is no such human

27 Ryszard Kulesza and Krzysztof Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1. Podręcznik do historii dla liceum ogólnokształcącego i technikum. Zakres rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2022).

28 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 57.

29 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 53, 155, 157.

30 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 58.

infrastructure that will stop the major disastrous events, neither in Europe, nor elsewhere.³¹

A chance to criticize the solely anthropocentric and managerial model of humans dealing with waters appears in the history of ancient China. Although there is nothing added in the commentary to this textbook topic, I notice the informative language that is used for the Yellow Yangtze Rivers, which opens an opportunity to discuss how people negotiated the space shared with these water bodies: “They [the rivers] carried silt to the surrounding areas, which fertilized the soil and promoted farming.”³² In other words, the rivers co-shaped human global civilization—from the ancient beginnings, it was not purely a human enterprise—but then the human enterprise started to proliferate and accelerate because of successful crops growth and irrigating engineering development. At the same time, such enormous rivers, as the Yellow River, were particularly dangerous and the textbook states that this aquatic giant “frequently changed her course, causing lots of overflows,” whereas the canal system reduced the catastrophic events only partially.³³ A perfect example to rise *historia magistrae vitae* lesson to teach.

The image of perceiving the major rivers as tools to develop civilizations based on very uncritically described model of agriculture like in the ancient Mesopotamia is repeated across the textbooks, both in their extended and basic versions. This model however needs to be questioned because “the renaturalization of streams and rivers is happening around the world”³⁴ and because of extensive activities to regain the over exploited and prone to desertification soil like in the huge areas of the United States. Nobody wants the Dust Bowl history to repeat. Poland, which is perhaps less discussed in such catastrophic contexts, is in fact also a drying land³⁵ and teaching the history of global civilizations could include—for the time being—a set of critical comments and ideas for debating how can we sustain water, how can we think through the roots of our big ancient cultures of aquatic amnesia that water is a limited resource on Earth, as well as all other natural resources.

31 FloodList: <https://floodlist.com> [accessed 26.02.2024].

32 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 60.

33 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 60.

34 Christof Mauch, *Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear* (Munich: RCC Perspectives, 2019), p. 22.

35 Compare studies on Polish droughts by Rajmund Przybylak et al., “Droughts in the Area of Poland in Recent Centuries in the Light of Multi-proxy Data,” *Climate of the Past* 2020, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 627–661, <https://doi.org/10.5194/cp-16-627-2020>.

Rubicon, and other forgotten rivers

The river that Cezar crossed probably does not apply to the river under the same name. The textbook does not ask the question, where was the famous Rubicon, or is it still there. We only know it was at the border between the Imperium Romanum and Gallium (before the Alps).³⁶ It is very often that we do not ask about the referents of geographical names that have symbolic meaning and function. However, to understand what was lost and what is at scarce, we need to re-locate the past landscapes to connect it to the present situation. All environmental history is about studying how people transformed natural landscapes and about the dynamics of these changes. In the case of water bodies like rivers, we can see how humans radically transformed them despite their rich cultural values or even importance for spiritual practice.

The history of Roman civilization is narrated in the similar way as all other ancient societies: human civilization progress is equated with nature conquer. The textbook praises the early engineering works without any reflection on the massive transformation of landscape and interference with the water circulation system. Rivers and highlands are categorized as “obstacles” which need to be defeated to build another piece of infrastructure. Roman ancient traditions of conquering nature will be further reinstalled in the massive drainage projects like the Pontine Marshes during the fascists’ regime³⁷ but, all in all, history likes to repeat itself and other authoritarian and criminous governments managed such modernist, progressive and techno-orientated projects against wet landscapes, including Nazis and communists.³⁸

Rare but so powerful are the examples from the early-modern period. Between the bright ancient times and modern Enlightened era, which led directly to the Anthropocene’s dead-end because of the Industrial Revolution (thanks to the invention of Watt’s steam engine),³⁹ stretches the period of historical and safe ecological darkness. The network of rivers and water levels were very different from today, so they were used to travel between the Scandinavian and Russian inland through the Newa, Dźwina, Dnieper in the so-called dark period of people’s migration and in the era of conquests between the Rome and rising

36 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 190.

37 Paolo Gruppuso, “Draining Marshlands, Reclaiming Land, Making Wetlands,” Royal Anthropological Institute – Anthropology and Conservation 2021, https://www.academia.edu/62471117/Draining_marshlands_reclaiming_land_making_wetlands [accessed 26.02.2024].

38 David Blackburn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: Norton, 2006); Rod Giblett, *Wetlands and Western Cultures: Denigration to Conservation* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

39 Compare e.g. in Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 8, 14.

Christian rulers in Europe.⁴⁰ This period could be debated more and linked with anthropological roots of ecological imagination. The enchanted rivers, wetlands, swamps and marshes inhabited by water deities and demons in folk belief, often embedded in Celtic, Slavic and Germanic mythological traditions are to be found in Europe in relation to the unregulated rivers of the past and their uncolonized landscapes.⁴¹ This also considers the most Polish river in the history of nation—the Vistula River. However, the textbooks reconstruct the Vistula and its dominant role as a trade route⁴² which peaked in the 16th century, but, once again, nothing can be found about the historical river and its hydrography that enabled the watercourse to serve as a waterway which is not possible anymore. Moreover, Polish bards emphasize the Vistula's non-aquatic and historical character by representing notions of Polishness through the Vistula and the alleged adverse nations similar to Russian engagement with the Volga and Newa.⁴³ Neither history, nor literary textbooks ask: what are the literary sources where the Vistula represents the river and its ecosystem, its environment and human-nature relations that could bring the real river into the environmental education and discussion.

Eventually, the Industrial Revolution which is discussed in the convention of civilizational progress and which was caused by the rapid growth of population, is a great opportunity to add some pressing questions on the ecological threats it also brought. One of them is further acceleration of agricultural and industrial production, which led to massive changes in landscapes around Europe (not only checked fields but also to the channelization and reclamation of remaining wetlands), including rivers' system.⁴⁴ In line with the Polish core curriculum, the textbooks perceive this "revolution" only in the perspective of extending production capacity and efficacy, as a milestone in Great Britain imperial development or as a mirror of social and urban changes (the new working class and new urban industrial agglomerations appearances).⁴⁵ In result, the disequilibrium between the environmental and cultural presence of water bodies consolidates.

40 Kulesza and Kowalewski, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 1*, p. 303.

41 Aleksander Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1986); Leonard J. Pełka, *Polska demonologia ludowa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 1987); Jim Dooge, "Water and Celtic Mythology," *Hydrologie dans les Pays Celtique* 1996, no. 79, pp. 13–24; Jan Tyszkiewicz, *Pogańska Polska. Wierzenia, kalendarz, zwyczaje* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, 2020).

42 Paweł Klint, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 2. Podręcznik do historii dla liceum ogólnokształcącego i technikum. Zakres rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2021), pp. 120–121.

43 Seweryn Goszczyński, "Wisła i święty Jakub," in *Dziela zbiorowe* (Lwów: Z. Wasilewski, 1911 [1831]); Adam Mickiewicz, "Ustęp," in *Dziady cz. III* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2012 [1832]).

44 Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh (PA): University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

45 Klint, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 2*, pp. 336–337.

The topic is continued without any (aqua)critical commentary in the textbook under the same title, *Understanding the Past* for the third grade and once again, the same situation as in the case of the British 18th century transformations, the European industrialization accelerated in the 19th century which was also strengthened by liberalisation of taxes, like in the context of freeing the rafting and water transport on the Elbe and Rhein,⁴⁶ and after The Crimean War—on the Danube. No comments on the ecological costs of this period are added (even how the development of polluting mining in Ruhr, Silesia or Saara was interconnected with water pollution). Although this was a turning point of most major western European arteries to lose their status as rivers and becoming canals.

Interestingly, literary Romanticism, with its praise for “nature,” coincides with this worst period for rivers in European history. From around the 1800s, all rivers were massively disturbed by the shift from wood to fossil fuels and transformed into navigable channels. This industrially accelerated development resulted in the exponential growth of urban agglomerations, as well as in hydropower and hydroengineering projects,⁴⁷ during which Europe’s “romantic” rivers earned their nicknames of “sewers.”⁴⁸ Channelized, polluted and depleted of fish,⁴⁹ and ecologically “half-dead,”⁵⁰ they began to be “restored” in Europe only after the 1970s. Polish partitions and wars contributed to the fact that the Vistula and other rivers were not “modernized” and “improved” the way that other European rivers were in the 18th and 19th centuries. Nonetheless, we had the most polluted rivers throughout the 1970s and the late modernity of communism and its heavy industry marked separately Polish “sewers” period.

The chapter devoted to colonialism titled meaningfully “The world in the era of coal and steel” also does not mention any ecological costs of building canals (such as Suez), mines, plantations, etc.⁵¹ Some other chapters related to technologically advanced wars and conflicts, especially in the 20th century could mention the environmental consequences when, for example, recalling the

46 Tomasz Krzemiński and Aneta Niewęglowska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 3. Podręcznik do historii dla liceum ogólnokształcącego i technikum. Poziom rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2021), p. 35.

47 Gertrud Haidvogel, “Historic Milestones of Human River Uses and Ecological Impacts,” in *Riverine Ecosystem Management*, eds. Stefan Schmutz and Jan Sendzimir (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 23–24.

48 Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography 1815–2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 146; Peter Ackroyd, *Thames: Sacred River* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), pp. 272–273.

49 Peter Coates, *Salmon* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp. 87–88.

50 Cioc, *The Rhine*, p. 146.

51 Krzemiński and Niewęglowska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 3*, pp. 212–213.

maritime or river-related battles⁵² or atomic bombs.⁵³ In Polish history textbooks, no connection is made between the totalitarian systems, imperialisms (during the Cold War), and the accompanying them environmental damage; or between genocide, crimes against humanity and nature. Even though, still, in the Baltic Sea there are postwar remains that threaten to pollute the region.⁵⁴ However, referring directly to the river as a body of water, some eco-historical studies on the WWII contamination effects on the Vistula have started appearing,⁵⁵ other—related to the fluvial archives like post-military heavy metals lodged into other waterbeds—need to be investigated more.

The contemporary history textbook rightly notices that in the end of 1970s “Polish economy was in a catastrophic condition”⁵⁶ but what about the environment? Will the teacher or student add this further question? The pollution is obviously mentioned in the case of Chernobyl “catastrophe” but not much is said on the scope of the environmental damage.⁵⁷ The environmental issues arise when we finish analysing the contemporary textbooks for teaching history at secondary and high schools in Poland. In the very end of the textbook, even alterglobalism is mentioned as a doctrine against the environmental destruction.⁵⁸ And finally, some major ecological events are enlisted, including the EXXon Valdez accident in 1989 and Deepwater Horizon in 2010.⁵⁹ We also see a photo of the dry Aral Sea.⁶⁰ The authors of the textbook conclude: problems with access to clean, drinking water is rising also in Europe.⁶¹ This looks like a new dark era, ecological and dramatic, and presented so weird when it is disconnected from the whole course of human history that led to these and other catastrophic consequences.

Overall, some new aspects of interpreting history and treating cultural heritage as a dynamic, disputable content, are introduced in the current textbooks. For example, women are presented as historical actors but still, Polish historical textbooks are mostly conservative in the way of reconstructing the past. They lack

52 Krzemiński and Niewęglowska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 3*; Robert Śniegocki and Agnieszka Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4. Podręcznik do historii dla liceum ogólnokształcącego i technikum. Poziom rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2022).

53 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 99, 213.

54 Jones Mared Gwyn, “Ticking time bomb,” <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/29/a-ticking-time-bomb-how-abandoned-war-weapons-are-poisoning-the-baltic-sea> [accessed 26.02.2024].

55 Beata Kaczmarek, “The Heavy Metal Hazard of Undiscovered World War I and II Gives in Poland,” *Global NEST Journal* 2019, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 461–465.

56 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 358.

57 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 392–393.

58 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 440.

59 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 442.

60 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 443.

61 Śniegocki and Zielińska, *Zrozumieć przeszłość 4*, p. 447.

the environmental history's critical input to provide better knowledge how history can teach us and prepare for future (global) challenges like the scarcity of water, rising sea levels (because of global warming) and pollution.

III Conclusions: the future of blue education (in Poland)

Such countries, like Poland, pose a special challenge to environmental education because of their difficult, wounded histories and frustrated nationalism (as an obvious outcome). To promote a radical change in historiography and educational philosophies which should contextualize the didactic curriculum in humanities—what I am suggesting here—is an ambitious task. But there are some germs of hope (not only “slow”)⁶² of people who recognize the necessity to faster develop knowledge how to adapt and how to facilitate rising awareness on the eco-crisis. What perhaps I would advocate specially for, to bring into this debate and show the potentiality in remodeling the existing teaching culture, is the concept of vulnerability and resilience of water bodies played out within the national identity. For example, the relevant symbols like the Vistula River which represents Poland and its wounded history but also stands up for the rebellion when it floods. Here, we go beyond what has been defined as the anthropocentric and only human history to open up the curriculum to questions and contents related to water heritage in the Polish nationalistic and military traditions.

On the example of historical textbooks, there is a great potential to merge national traumas and anxieties and practice through education what Bruno Latour framed as “sharing agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy.”⁶³ Lost political autonomy in 19th and 20th centuries by Poland can in result extend the connection with the non-human world and facilitate discussion on ecological consequences of wars and other military conflicts. By focusing on water bodies, we can reactivate different paths of memory, retell some stories, and recognize the non-human victimhood or activities in the course of history to conserve and protect them better for the future. This, though, is a material probably for a completely new textbook.

62 See Mauch, *Slow Hope*.

63 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge and Medford: Polity, 2017), p. 62.

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Abstract

This chapter's purpose is to acquaint an international audience with the contexts and practices of environmental humanities education in Poland, focusing on the representation of water as a central theme. The first central issue discussed involves a theoretical overview of water heritage within the aquacritical perspective. Subsequently, the chapter undertakes an analysis of pivotal examples derived from current textbooks and the core curriculum, aiming to elucidate the discourse on challenges within hydroecology in contemporary educational settings. Central inquiries to proceed include the identification of source texts and their didactic contents shaping discussions on hydroecological challenges in schools, examining how educational institutions are preparing young Poles to address real issues such as the Polish drought and diminishing water resources, and assessing the

integration of such preparations across specific disciplines such as history and Polish studies. Furthermore, the chapter advocates for the urgent development of blue humanities education. Finally, the chapter synthesizes and highlights the gaps and challenges within contemporary blue humanities education in Poland, while arguing for the need to reformulate and remodel didactic contents to better reflect the rich cultural water heritage discussed in Polish schools.

Keywords: blue humanities education, water in humanities education, Polish environmental education, aquacriticism, environmental history, textbooks.

Can a River Be a Person? Fostering Public Aqua-awareness in Poland

Water is not a commercial product like any other but, rather, a heritage which must be protected, defended and treated as such.¹
The preamble to the “Water Framework Directive”

In the last scene of *Whale Nation*,² a documentary which came to movie theaters in Poland at the end of December 2023, the narrator observes that the Earth is blue when seen from the outer space. This impression is given by the seas and oceans that envelop the planet. From this perspective, the Earth is mainly the home (understood as *oikos*) of aquatic creatures—of fish and whales—but far less so of humans. Reputed as the most disseminated photograph of the globe, The Blue Marble, taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts in 1972, also pictures the Earth as blue, with some white of the clouds, green patches of Africa’s tropical vegetation, and brown spots of the Sahara and Middle East deserts, against the black background of the space. A similar viewpoint resonates in a subversive question a student addresses to a teacher in the children’s comic book *Hubert Reeves Explains: Oceans* by the well-known astrophysicist Hubert Reeves.³ Having seen a satellite image of the globe in which the water is much clearer than the land, a boy on a school outing observes: “The Earth should be called the sea, shouldn’t it?”⁴ Though apparently ludicrous and inconsequential, this remark proves to be anything but, since, on closer scrutiny, it makes us realize that a huge part of our planet is made of water. In fact, water takes no less than 70% of the

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1 European Union, “Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy,” *Official Journal L 327, 22/12/2000 P. 0001–0073*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2000/60/oj> [accessed 12.02.2023].

2 *Whale Nation* (original title: *Les Gardiennes de la planète*), written and directed by Jean-Albert Lièvre, France (Canal+ France, Ciné+), 2023.

3 In the Polish edition, the book’s title itself is a question: “What do we need oceans for?” Hubert Reeves and David Vandermeulen, *Po co nam oceany?*, artist Daniel Casanave, colorist Claire Champion, trans. Paweł Łapiński (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Debit, 2022).

4 Hubert Reeves and David Vandermeulen, *Hubert Reeves Explains: Oceans*, artist Daniel Casanave, colorist Claire Champion (Europe Comics, 2019), p. 6.

surface of the globe. Water also accounts for the same proportion of the human body: we are 70% water. This is the reason why the Earth is called a blue planet and stands out among other planets in this respect. Freshwater makes up a mere 2.5% of our planet's hydro-resources, and in fact only 0.6% of this volume is the freshwater from which our drinking water comes.⁵ Rivers and lakes amount to but 0.15% of the total volume of water in the world, with lakes holding fourfold as much water as rivers do.⁶ Meanwhile, the flowing river waters were pivotal in the rise of human civilization, urbanization, and the great acceleration of the history of the human species. Settlements and towns were founded on rivers; raw materials were floated down rivers; rivers were used to power hydrotechnical devices, and rivers were simply where sewage was drained. The largest cities of Poland arose on and grew by rivers: Warsaw, Cracow, and Sandomierz on the Vistula, Poznan on the Warta, and Wroclaw on the Oder. This essential role of rivers is not a thing of the past, and we still need rivers to go on living and, simply, to survive, a truth that the climate crisis, global warming, droughts, and ever more frequent cloudbursts make us acknowledge with particular acuteness.

Every river is a story. It can exist in many various ways in bygone times (as vividly expressed in the phrase “the memory of a river”), in the present, and in future visions. It may also take on plentiful forms—ranging from a stream, a river that is not, and an imaginary reservoir, to underground flowing water, anthropogenic water, and a sewer, to an atmospheric river—and co-exist with various topographies, with other landscape features. Recently, Poland has remembered how crucial rivers are, which we believe is related to embodied knowledge that embeds us in the “here and now,” in the real experience of the lowering of the water table, the disappearance of lakes and rivers, ongoing droughts in many regions of Poland, and ecological calamities caused by discharges of saline waters, including the 2022 Oder environmental disaster as the harshest poisoning of a river in Europe's modern history. A few years ago, hardly anybody took interest in rivers in Poland; Poles paid no attention to rivers, and ours was the life of riverless people. This has changed. The Oder catastrophe was an impulse for a nationwide environmental awakening; it made us aware of the importance of rivers with clean water flowing in their unregulated streambeds.

In this paper, two different vocal parts—of a natural scientist and of a humanist—meander to talk of rivers, to chart the greatest human-triggered threats to them, to have a look at how the natural features of rivers are destroyed, and also to relate the public struggle for rivers in Poland. The latter efforts are par-

5 GUS, “Raport 2020. Polska na drodze zrównoważonego rozwoju. Cel 6. Zapewnić wszystkim ludziom dostęp do wody i warunków sanitarnych poprzez zrównoważoną gospodarkę zasobami wodnymi,” 2020, <https://raportsdg.stat.gov.pl/2020/cel6.html> [accessed 22. 12. 2023].

6 Gospodarka Wodna, “Zasoby wodne na świecie,” <http://iche2002.pl/zasoby-wodne-na-swieci.html> [accessed 22. 12. 2023].

ticularly robust in cultural projects and artistic practices, in literature, in studies of rivers⁷, exhibitions,⁸ movies,⁹ and sound maps,¹⁰ all of which foster socially engaged attitudes, primarily “ecological disobedience.”¹¹ These sentiments and mindsets can be observed in Poland in protests staged to defend the natural life of bodies of water.

The dismal condition of rivers

Show me your river, and I'll tell you who you are.¹²

Combined with the ignorance and inaction of governments, human activities causing biodiversity loss and climate change ravage the world. Rivers are the most affected part of our globe; they are among the most degraded ecosystems. In our understanding, a river is not only a natural streambed filled with flowing water, but also, in line with the anthropocentric reasoning, a concrete-paved canal filled

7 See, e.g., the biographies of the rivers Ner, Vistula, Oder, Rawa, and Mała.

8 See, e.g., *Niech płyną! Inne rzeki Warszawy* [*Let Them Flow: The Other Rivers of Warsaw*] at the Wola Museum of Warsaw (20 January – 29 May, 2022), where old plans, maps, drawings, and photographs were used to shed light on Warsaw's numerous rivers; *Temat: rzeka. Rawa w ujęciu interdyscyplinarnym* [*Topic: River. The Rawa from an Interdisciplinary Perspective*], held by the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, the Silesian Museum, and the Metropolitan Association of Upper Silesia and Dąbrowa Basin, at the former Silesian Museum in Katowice in 2022 (Metropolia GZM, “Rzeka Rawa zainspirowała studentów ASP. Prace artystyczne można obejrzyć do końca lipca,” July 19, 2022, <https://metropoliagzm.pl/2022/07/19/rzeka-rawa-zainspirowala-studentow-asp-prace-artystyczne-mozna-obejrzec-do-konca-lipca> [accessed 22. 12. 2023]). See also Wrocław's Hydropolis, a science centre dedicated to water (Hydropolis, “History of the Building,” <https://hydropolis.pl/en/history> [accessed 12. 12. 2023]).

9 See, the documentary *Until the Last Drop* (dir. Ewa Ewart) and the spectacular *River* (dir. Jennifer Peedom and Joseph Nizeti) exploring the role of rivers in today's world, narrated by Willem Dafoe and with music by, among others, Radiohead. See also the Netflix *High Water* series of 2022 (dir. Jan Holoubek and Bartłomiej Iganciuk).

10 See Michał Zygmunt's latest album *Dźwiękowy szlak Odry* [*The Oder Sound Trail*] with field recordings carried out over the six winter and spring months of 2019/2020. For more details on soundscape, audio-trails of the river, audibility, and the ways nature sounds, see Adam Robiński, “Z Pismem u Michała Zygmunta: Nad Odrą słycać wojnę,” *Pismo. Magazyn Opinii* 2023, nr 1, special issue: *Wokół wody*, pp. 54–60.

11 For an extensive discussion of the notion of “ecological disobedience,” see Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek, and Dawid Gostyński, “Wstęp: Więcej niż las,” in *O jeden las za daleko. Demokracja, kapitalizm i nieposłuszeństwo ekologiczne w Polsce*, ed. Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek, and Dawid Gostyński (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, 2019), p. 16. Ecological disobedience arises in defective, warped, and brutalized democracy. It aims to halt authoritarian political designs, undermine the capitalistic model of the state, and build a community including forests, waters, and animals; Czapliński, Bednarek, and Gostyński, “Wstęp,” pp. 19–20.

12 Paweł Jokiel and Adam Bartnik, *Ner. Monografia hydrologiczna niekochanej rzeki* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2020).

with flowing sewage and the water ecosystem as a whole, a habitat of billions of entities: plants overgrowing river bottoms, fish, crustaceans, amphibians, and animals living at the water/land boundary. The river is thus not only a reservoir of potable water, a shipping route, a cesspit, or a bathing place; it is much more than that—a living organism with its own “cardiovascular system,” which transports flowing water across all lands. The human being and the river basin share a similar anatomy; maps of rivers resemble images of the circulatory system, with innumerable reciprocally-mirroring forms.¹³ It takes a bit of embolism, just a miniscule clot, to bring on a stroke and make a living organism with its system of communicating blood vessels stop working. The same is true for the water system of the Earth, as argued by the British biologist James Lovelock, whose Gaia hypothesis holds that all life on the Earth is a self-regulating organism that operates collectively and sustains the conditions of living.¹⁴ Lovelock thought of Gaia as Mother Earth embodying the unity of all living beings, including water bodies—rivers, seas, and oceans.

When looking for the causes of the ever more frequent occlusions of “Mother Earth’s arteries,” we must bear in mind the concept of planetary boundaries. They designate the limits to the endurance of our planet, determined by the key factors on which the continuation of life on the Earth is premised and demarcating the confines within which we can safely deploy the resources of our planet. Six of the nine planetary boundaries have already been breached, with three of them directly related to river functions.¹⁵

Firstly, the biogeochemical flows, specifically the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles in nature, find themselves in the “high risk zone” (the red zone) of exceeding the planetary boundary. The nitrogen and phosphorus cycling in the environment is mainly impacted by the inordinate use of fertilizers and the expansion of factory-farming. Today, more than one hundred million tons of nitrogen-based fertilizers are annually applied on the fields.¹⁶ As excessive quantities of nitrogen- and phosphate-rich fertilizers are transported to rivers and oceans, the growth of algae is boosted and the amount of oxygen in their water drops below what is needed to sustain fish. In this way, marine dead zones proliferate and spread.

13 Olga Tokarczuk evoked these layered correspondences in the “Nobel Lecture by Olga Tokarczuk,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture> [accessed 12.02.2024].

14 James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. ix.

15 Katherine Richardson et al., “Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries,” *Science Advances* 2023, no. 9 (37), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>.

16 Richardson et al., “Earth Beyond Six.”

Another planetary boundary, one indirectly related to the 2022 Oder environmental disaster, concerns new chemicals (such as plastics, drugs, xenobiotics, antidepressants, dyes, pesticides, cosmetic ingredients, etc.) which are released into the environment, polluting rivers, oceans, the air, and soil. The chemical pollution level in the Earth's biosphere has surpassed the safety ceiling for the continuation of human civilization. The chemical industry is the second largest production industry in the world. There are estimated 350,000 human-produced chemical substances (or their blends) on the global market.

In 2023, yet another planetary boundary was breached, as the resources of freshwater shrank below the safety level. Importantly, freshwater is understood as comprising both so-called green water (the invisible water in soil, plants grown by farmers, the forest vegetation, etc.) and blue water (the water in rivers, lakes, etc.).¹⁷

People have already destroyed most of the globe's rivers; in fact, a mere one third (37%) of the world's 246 longest rivers still flow along their natural watercourses.¹⁸ Since the beginning of the 20th century, most of Europe's rivers have become polluted, regulated, or fragmented (by means of dams and weirs). As a result, the biodiversity and the quality of water have disastrously plummeted. The common dredging of riverbeds for flood control causes a mass-scale loss of floodplains and marshland. Actually, there are more than one million partitions on rivers in Europe; this makes Europe a continent with the most fragmented rivers. There are 77,000 barriers of this kind in Poland, with a dam in Włocławek standing out as a truly egregious example. Infamous for being Poland's most harmful hydroengineering construction, the dam seals off 68,000 kilometers of Polish rivers, making them inaccessible to migratory fish.¹⁹ Admittedly, river barriers are being removed, even if at a rather slow pace: almost 7,000 dams have been dismantled in Europe so far²⁰ (in Poland, a mere three in the corresponding timeframe, regrettably²¹). However, hydromorphological pressures are concomitantly increasing as riverbeds are being straightened, streamlengths shortened, meanders buried, partitions put in, rivers constrained by embankments, and riverbanks reinforced with retaining walls. This tendency is on the rise, and hydromorphological pressures currently affect about 40% of the rivers in the

17 Richardson et al., "Earth Beyond Six."

18 Barbara Sowa, "Mętna woda," *Pismo. Magazyn Opinii* 2023, nr 1, special issue: *Wokół wody*, p. 71.

19 Sowa, "Mętna woda," p. 71.

20 European Rivers Network, "Dam Removal Europe," <https://www.ern.org/en/dam-removal-europe> [accessed 22.12.2023].

21 The three dismantled structures include: a barrier on the Wilkówka Creek in the Beskid Mountains, a weir on the Sopot River in the Lubelskie voivodship, and a barrage on the Obarzynka River in the Subcarpathia region. See Sowa, "Mętna woda," p. 71.

European Union, most severely in Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, and the U.K.²²

In Poland, 98.9% of rivers²³ do not meet the good status criteria stipulated by the EU Water Framework Directive.²⁴ According to the statistics of the Chief Inspectorate for Environmental Protection (Polish: *Główny Inspektorat Ochrony Środowiska*; GIOŚ), merely 8.5% of the rivers in Poland boast a good chemical status and an ecological potential.²⁵ As reported in the *Krajowy program renaturyzacji wód powierzchniowych* (KPRWP) [*National Program for the Renaturalization of Surface Waters*], 91% of Poland's rivers are in need of renaturalization, and 82% are impacted by considerable hydromorphological pressures.²⁶

For years, the Oder and most other Polish rivers have been targeted by activities undercutting the stability of the river ecosystems and compromising their natural capacity of self-purification and regeneration. These activities include regulation works, the straightening of rivers, the construction of barrages, the destruction of oxbow lakes, and dredging. Huge volumes of industrial, municipal, and agricultural waste are dumped into rivers, often without any monitoring. The risk of river-related environmental disasters is greatly enhanced today by the global temperature increase, droughts this increase brings about, and low water levels. If no fast and firm change in river management in Poland takes place, the ecocidal crimes on the environment, such as those recently perpetrated on Polish rivers (on the Oder, as mentioned above; on the Vistula as a result of the discharge of untreated wastewater from the Czajka Sewage Treatment Plant; and on the Warta, to which pesticides and rodenticides were drained²⁷), are bound to recur

22 European Environment Agency, *European Waters – Assessment of Status and Pressures: EEA Report No 8/2012*, https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/european-waters-assessment-2012/at_download/file [accessed 22.12.2023].

23 Główny Inspektorat Ochrony Środowiska, *Syntetyczny raport z klasyfikacji i oceny stanu jednolitych części wód powierzchniowych wykonanej za 2019 rok na podstawie danych z lat 2014–2019* (Warszawa: GIOŚ, 2020), p. 29, Fig. 21, https://www.gios.gov.pl/images/dokumenty/pms/monitoring_wod/Synteza_ocena_stanu_wod_powierzchniowych_2014-2019r.pdf [accessed 22.12.2023].

24 European Union, “Directive 2000/60/EC.”

25 Dorota Parcheta, “Monitoring i ocena jednolitych części wód powierzchniowych rzecznych.” Główny Inspektorat Ochrony Środowiska, January 26, 2024, <https://wody.gios.gov.pl/pjwp/publication/RIVERS/88> [accessed 26.01.2024].

26 Państwowe Gospodarstwo Wodne Wody Polskie, “Krajowy program renaturyzacji wód powierzchniowych,” October 3, 2019, <https://wody.gov.pl/nasze-dzialania/krajowy-program-renaturyzacji-wod-powierzchniowych> [accessed 22.12.2023].

27 For more details, see “Ścieki z Warszawy płyną w dół Wisły. Czy grozi kontakt ze skażoną wodą?” Onet.pl, August 31, 2020, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/awaria-czajki-ścieki-z-warszawy-plyna-w-dol-wisly-czym-grozi-kontakt-z-woda/s36z103> [accessed 26.01.2024]; Piotr Żytnicki, “Trucizna zabiła w Warcie tysiące ryb. Współwłaściciel firmy Bros zaczął proces od ataku,” *Wyborcza.pl–Poznań*, February 2, 2022, <https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/po>

ever more frequently. The veins of Mother Earth will be clogged up with floating garbage and toxic substances, exposing the planet's all human and non-human inhabitants to grave hazard. Despite that, the signs of the Earth's circulatory issues tend to be belittled.

On the Oder: Or, how we ruined Poland's second longest river

When you say "river," I hear "the Oder"
 When you say "home," I hear "Poland"
 When you say "the Oder," I hear "hand"

A firm arm your home rests on²⁸

Rafał Wojaczek, "To nie fraszka" ["It's no quip"]

Although the landscape of the Oder had an important part in the work of Rafał Wojaczek, one of the most famed scandalizing poets in socialist Poland, and later in the writings of the Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk, the Oder is not really counted among the rivers perennially celebrated by artists, such as the Rhine, the Danube, and the Vistula. The Vistula is of special relevance to Poles; it has its own mythology and narratives and is symbolically personified by the legendary Siren, half-woman half-fish. The Oder holds but a secondary position in the hierarchy of Polish rivers. In Tokarczuk's vivid depiction, the Oder is "a kind of country viscountess at the court of the Amazon queen."²⁹ Given this, Poles seem to feel they are the Vistula-tribe rather than the Oder-tribe.

Andrzej Woźnica, director of the Silesian Water Centre at the University of Silesia, attributes this disinterest to the cartography of the Oder. A boundary river, the Oder is born in Czechia and flows along the German bank over quite a stretch of its watercourse; as such, it is a river of three nations. As opposed to the Oder's multi-nationality, the Vistula is an entirely Polish river, historically convergent with the fortunes of the Polish state and traversing the center of the country.³⁰ In the memory of many Poles, the Oder is predominantly a "post-German" river; it "does not burble" in Polish, and some pejorative associations it triggers were only aggravated in 1997, when it drowned the capital of Lower Silesia in what was dubbed the flood of the millennium. Besides, the history of the Oder encompasses at least two hundred years of pollution and concerted efforts

znan/7,36001,28066946,trucizna-zabila-w-warcie-tysiace-ryb-wspolwlasiciel-firmy.html [accessed 26.01.2024].

28 Rafał Wojaczek, "To nie fraszka," qtd. in Dolnośląskość.pl, <http://dolnoslaskosc.pl/rafal-wojaczek-to-nie-fraszka,260.html> [accessed 26.01.2024].

29 Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), p. 3.

30 See Andrzej Chwalba, *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2023).

to convert it into a utilitarian river by shortening and regulation.³¹ The very name of the Oder (Polish: *Odra*) has unpleasant connotations because, in Polish, it is a homonym of a contagious childhood infection (measles), though the two are etymologically unrelated, and the name of the disease is derived from a rash, which is one of its symptoms (causing skin abrasions from scratching; Polish: *odarcia*). Filip Springer argues in his *Mein Gott, jak pięknie* [*Mein Gott, How Beautiful*] that the Oder is one that “rips through.”³² In German, *oder* is an inconspicuous conjunction—“or”—which suitably reflects the liminal quality of the river. The eminent Polish linguist Jan Miodek insists that the proper name derives from Proto-Indo-European *uodr*, denoting water.³³

Until 1945, the Oder was a river without any clear memory. Of course, local authors wrote about the Oder, yet those texts have never been enshrined in Polish culture.³⁴ Before the environmental disaster of 2022, the Oder was contemplated by Tokarczuk, who had lived in its vicinity for some time and regarded the Oder as her river.³⁵ This symbolic gesture of self-positioning by the river and the recollections of it nurtured Tokarczuk’s imagination, becoming a recurrent topos associated with her childhood and formative of her “personal memory of the river.”³⁶ Both in her novel *Flights* (*Bieguni*, 2008; English edition 2107) and in the collection of essays *Moment niedźwiedzia* [*The Moment of the Bear*] (2012), which includes her piece “Odra” [“The Oder”], Tokarczuk muses on wandering to the river, which she then perceived as uncrossable, free from bridges, and wild. She particularly liked spending time in the meanders of the Old Oder, where she

31 Andrzej Woźnica, “Odra już nie meandruje. Z prof. Andrzejem Woźnicą rozmawia Joanna Wiśniowska,” *Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present* 2023, nr 50, pp. 12–14. As a result of the one-sided, anthropocentric approach to the Oder, the river shrank by about 200 kilometers and lost its wild quality. With her streambed straightened and hydrotechnical structures erected at many places, the Oder was degraded by excessive technicalization.

32 Filip Springer, *Mein Gott, jak pięknie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2023), p. 17.

33 Wojciech Browarny, “Odra. Wrocławskie urzeczenie,” *Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present* 2023, nr 50, pp. 68–69.

34 Tomasz Różycki, “Próba wody,” *Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present* 2023, nr 50, p. 50.

35 River motifs are a pronounced presence in Tokarczuk’s writing. *Primeval and Other Times* describes the annual flooding of the Czarna River. This is what made the vicar hate the river as, having experienced a divine revelation telling him to tame the river, he built a dike to separate the river from the surrounding meadows. This, however, did not prevent the Czarna from naturally flooding the grassland and supporting the propagation of shameless frogs. The vicar likened the river to Satan. The story shows how nature is treated by humans, and also by religious systems, in an attempt to dominate it, tame its natural forces, and make it useful to people. The wild and the unknown are regarded as a devilish force. This shows as well that, instead of feeling part of nature, humans separate themselves from it and seek to be dominant beings. For its part, *Flights* recounts the experience of the first journey, with the Oder as its destination. See also Robert Rient’s interview with Olga Tokarczuk, “Uznają rzekę jako osobę. Rozmowa z Olgą Tokarczuk,” *Osoba Odra*, February 12, 2023, <https://osobaodra.pl/rozmowa-z-olga-tokarczuk> [accessed 26.01.2024].

36 The wording is borrowed from Browarny, “Odra,” p. 62.

felt a mystery lay hidden and the history of the river was registered. The river she remembers from childhood was alive and had a defined shape, which was nevertheless subject to change. The river, as experienced by Tokarczuk, was never the same; it constantly mutated and transfigured: “[D]id it not shed its skin like a snake? Did it not molt like an animal?”³⁷ She was often scared by the vast, whirling, and metallic water. She heard its dark, restless growl and watched its various hues, from dark green to anthracite black. To Tokarczuk, the Oder was undoubtedly a living being and a power that did not always respect human laws, because its might outmatched any human force and ruled time and space. In an interview Tokarczuk gave to Robert Rient in 2023, she talked of the Oder as a creature with its own history inscribed in records, having a memory and a name of its own, and holding a subject position as an axis of the political order dividing two great cultures: Germanic and Slavonic. The Oder was fought for, was a site where borders were demarcated, and took part in political treaties.³⁸ In her essay “Odra,” Tokarczuk recalls:

Its current was hurried and hectic, swirling, as if the river was boiling inside. It dragged on its back branches and boughs, which she would toss against the banks. It could be strong as a beast of burden, which, though itself amorphous, could shapeshift into any creature it wished. On sunny days, it let people tame it and carried coal barges or pushed timber-filled rafts forward [...]. The Oder had an older sister. Such sisters appear when a river changes its watercourse and a meander splits off the main streambed.³⁹

In July 2022, an environmental disaster took place in the Oder, a living being with its own extensive aquatic ecosystem. The magnitude of the catastrophe was unprecedented not only in Poland but also in Europe as a whole, and the event sparked a recently unmatched public outrage, mobilizing Polish society around a dispute over nature.⁴⁰ For several months, the issue was profusely covered by the major Polish media, and one year after the event, the theme was revisited as an admonition for Poland in the corresponding summertime period. The low water level, high temperatures, and abruptly altering salinity rates provoked by detrimental human activities, all combined to cause a proliferation of *Prymnesium*

37 Olga Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), p. 155.

38 “Uznaję rzekę jako osobę. Rozmowa z Olgą Tokarczuk.”

39 Tokarczuk, *Moment*, pp. 154–155.

40 While environmental protests have been launched in Poland since the very onset of the democratic transition (1989), they became more concerted when the construction of the Augustów ring road began. In 2017, the conflict around the Białowieża Forest broke out. In November 2018, people organized to protect wild boars in conjunction with African swine fever, and in 2022, to prevent the construction of a wall along the border with Belarus. Vehement opposition was also provoked by the 2021 law on environmental protection (later dubbed *lex Szyszko* from the name of the minister), which allowed cutting down trees on private property without license from competent authorities.

parvum, a harmful alga species previously absent from Polish rivers. The species produces toxins which are lethal to fish and other gill-breathing animals. The river was breathing its last along almost 500 kilometers of its length; the haul of dead fish bodies amounted to 360 tons.⁴¹ The demise of fish and plentiful other organisms in the Oder prompted the public realization that pollution (including the legally approved discharges of salinated water from coal mines), coupled with biodiversity loss and climate change, could have devastating ramifications not only for the wildlife but also for humans, the economy, and the planet.

However, that greatest environmental catastrophe in recent decades should not come as a surprise. It was obvious that if we treated rivers as sewers, a disaster of this kind could not but strike one or another Polish rivers sooner or later. What else was to be expected if, in 2022 alone, the State Water Holding Polish Waters (Polish: *Państwowe Gospodarstwo Wodne Wody Polskie*) issued more than 78,000 permits to flush wastewater and meteoric water into rivers across the country (with more than 10,000 permits pertaining to the Oder and its tributaries)?⁴² The fact that such licenses are issued in conformity with law in no way protects rivers against disasters. Besides, the illegal pipes and outfalls that open into rivers are multiple and well concealed. Inspections carried out by the Polish Waters along Polish rivers in 2022 found about 1,400 sewage outlets that had no valid water-law license to discharge wastewater. Two hundred and eighty-two unauthorized outfalls of this kind were identified along the Oder; fifty-seven cases were investigated by the police.⁴³ Despite inspections, the volume of sewage that ends up in Polish rivers is staggering.

In defense of rivers: Mapping cultural activities

We are voices of rivers and communities that live by rivers. Rivers cannot speak for themselves. They cannot hold their poisoners to account. They cannot shout when dams are being built across them.⁴⁴

Szymon Opryszek, *Woda. Historia pewnego porwania*

41 Gary Free et al., *An EU Analysis of the Ecological Disaster in the Oder River of 2022*, (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023), <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/067386>.

42 Instytut Ochrony Środowiska – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, *Raport kończący prace zespołu ds. sytuacji w Odrze*, <https://ios.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/raport-konczacy-prace-zespołu-ds-sytuacji-w-odrze-2.pdf> [accessed 26.01.2024], p. 10.

43 SEKA, “Wyniki kontroli: 1400 upustów w Polsce nie ma pozwolenia wodnoprawnego na odprowadzanie ścieków,” August 24, 2022, <https://www.seka.pl/wyniki-kontroli-1400-upustow-w-polsce-nie-ma- pozwolenia-wodnoprawnego-na-odprowadzanie-sciekow> [accessed 22.12.2023].

44 Szymon Opryszek, *Woda. Historia pewnego porwania* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2023), p. 249.

The tragedy of the Oder, a not-fully-tamed Polish river, caused a huge public uproar in Poland and initiated a radical change in Poles' approach to rivers. The statements of the PiS government officials⁴⁵ and their arguments for the regulation of the Oder ran counter to scientific evidence and were resolutely defied by the citizens. The Deputy Minister Infrastructure Marek Gróbarczyk time and again claimed that barrages must be constructed to improve the Oder water management. Citing concern with "flood control," the government planned to expand and restore the glory of the Oder Waterway (Polish: *Odrzańska Droga Wodna*). According to Gróbarczyk, such exertions were supposed to prevent a repeat of the 2022 environmental disaster.⁴⁶ Similar projects were developed by the government for other Polish rivers: the Vistula, the Warta, the Noteć, and the Bug. The very fact that, until recently, rivers were under the management by the Minister of Infrastructure, made Poland's flowing waters more like water motorways than living beings. As we are writing these words, we are awaiting the new government's decisions on its policies for rivers. We believe that the way rivers are treated in Poland will change diametrically.

The experience of loss and solastagia⁴⁷—mourning for creatures of multiple species and grief for the damage of a vital river which was dying before their eyes—made thousands of Poles take to the streets to protest against the neglect of water. The Oder Tribe (Polish: *Plemię Odry*) came together,⁴⁸ assembling environmental activist and citizens, and a march for the Oder⁴⁹ took place, with its participants walking 850 kilometers within 45 days to campaign for legal personhood for the Oder (which we discuss below). Researchers from the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Polish Hydrobiological Society (Polish: *Polskie Towarzystwo Hydrobiologiczne*), and other institutions⁵⁰ issued recom-

45 Adrian Kowarzyk, "Odra powinna być uregulowaną rzeką. Wiem, że budzi to protesty Niemiec," *PAP*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1498230%2Codra-po-winna-byc-uregulowana-rzeka-wiem-ze-budzi-protesty-niemiec.html> [accessed 12.01.2024].

46 Mikołaj Kobryński, "Przyszłość Odrzańskiej Drogi Wodnej według Ministerstwa Infrastruktury," *Rynek Infrastruktury*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.rynekinfrastruktury.pl/wiadomosci/inzynieria-i-innowacje/przyszlosc-odrzanskiej-drogi-wodnej-wedlug-ministerstwa-infrastruktury-86838.html> [accessed 30.01.2024].

47 See Glenn A. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 37–53.

48 Osoba Odra, "Plemię Odry," <https://osobaodra.pl/plemie-odry> [accessed 12.01.2024].

49 Osoba Odra, "Marsz dla Odry wystartował!" April 20, 2023, <https://osobaodra.pl/marsz-dla-odry-wystartowal> [accessed 12.01.2024].

50 The Polish Hydrobiological Society issued a statement in the wake of the Oder ecological disaster. In view of the current water crisis, the researchers deemed the policies adopted by the Polish government to upgrade Poland's waterways to the international status utopian. They pointed out that those policies also contravened the strategy of the European Commission and diverged from the stipulations of the Water Framework Directive, which ruled out the construction of waterways in precious ecosystem areas. The building of dikes and dams, the straightening and concrete-paving of riverbeds, the removal of plants, and the demolition

mendations to stop putting transversal structures in rivers, constructing barges, and canalizing rivers. They emphasized that unregulated or renaturalized rivers, which could overflow naturally, were simply safer for the inhabitants, whereas the capacity of narrowed and deepened waterways to absorb flood waves was depleted.

Recently, the revival of aqua-awareness in Poland has translated into a copious range of activist events: marches, protests, happenings, conferences, exhibitions, and debates dedicated to the role of rivers in our life and highlighting the urgency of effective action to prevent ecological disasters. Artists, writers, humanists, and culture-makers have employed their signature tools to bring the problems of Polish rivers into the spotlight, seeking to give them greater visibility and audibility in public space and to encourage the public to venture into the field and appreciate the power and importance of the local water ecosystems. Writers' concern for the flowing waters was at the root of a range of captivating publications that have appeared on the Polish book market. In 2023 alone, several captivating non-fiction pieces were published. Interest in environmental non-fiction may bespeak the public need for realistic narratives on water, the desire to retrieve the memory of them and of non-human actors, and willingness to listen to signals one receives when venturing outdoors.

In Jan Mencwel's *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* [*A Hydro-Mystery: Who Takes away Polish Water and How to Reclaim It*],⁵¹ the writer crisscrosses Poland with his interlocutors, guides, experts, and activists to explain the sources of the current water stress and to crack the eponymous hydro-mystery. The plotline of the reportage begins from an excursion into grand history: the beginnings of the modernization of Poland, involving the removal of wetlands, swamps, marshes, bogs, and mud in order to subjugate the blue element. Mencwel recounts the story of Poland's Great Drainage for the sake of progress and civilizing the country's territory. He superbly retraces this enterprise in the classics of Polish literature, identifying water contexts in the texts of Stefan Żeromski and Maria Dąbrowska. Mencwel revisits this old narrative

of beaver dams were all assessed as anachronistic. Water reservoirs produced by the damming of rivers, the researchers explained, did not alleviate the effects of droughts because only the terrain adjacent to the reservoirs were hydrated while large areas behind the barrage were deprived of water. Instead of taming rivers, we should rather seek to preserve them in their wild form and to regenerate, preferably to renaturalize the transformed ones to restore them to as natural a status as possible. For more details, see Polskie Towarzystwo Hydrobiologiczne, "Stanowisko Polskiego Towarzystwa Hydrobiologicznego," August 24, 2022, <http://www.pth.home.pl/pobierz/StanowiskoPTHwsprawieOdry.pdf> [accessed 22. 12. 2023].

51 Jan Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2023). The title alludes to *Hydrozagadka*, a very popular 1971 comedy directed and co-written by Andrzej Kondratiuk, in which a superhero character tries to solve the riddle of water disappearing in Warsaw amid a summer heatwave.

because, even though long obsolete, it still prevails in many areas, as indicated by the undying drive to drain marshland, develop industry in peat moors (peat extraction), and “clean” forests of water-retaining dead logs. Mencwel elucidates that the water crisis, which we often fail to notice, is first and foremost a crisis for non-human beings. In this context, he evokes the black-tailed godwit, a bird species at risk of extinction due to a disturbed water balance, which is the Polish counterpart of the symbolic polar bear. He also references the beaver, an animal closely connected to water retention.⁵² Mencwel devotes ample attention to today’s transformation challenges, such as lignite mining, which causes water depletion in Polish lakes (as exemplified by Lake Gopło affected by a strip mine in Konin). He also ponders the Oder disaster,⁵³ inquiring whether “black gold” was the gravedigger of the river. Besides, he looks into the commodification of rivers and their ecosystems, illustrating his argument with sand extraction from the Vistula.

Maciej Robert adopts a different approach to the flowing water in his essayistic *Rzeki, których nie ma* [*Rivers That Are Not*].⁵⁴ Robert fuses a poet’s sensibility and a reporter’s inquisitiveness to reflect on rivers, which exist and, on his innovative take, do not exist in Poland in a variety of ways. He depicts rivers and non-rivers —ones periodically drying out, turned into sewers, buried by sand, and paved with concrete, forgotten and imaginary rivers, and fictional rivers that have never been there. In doing so, he draws on a range of literary texts, citing Czesław Miłosz, Olga Tokarczuk, Tomasz Różycki, and Esther Kinsky, with the latter’s writing being axial to Robert’s fluvial depictions. Starting from central Poland, specifically from Lodz, with none of the close-to-twenty rivers it once had actually surviving today, Robert draws up (aqua)graphies, in which he dwells on the Łódka called the Smródka,⁵⁵ the non-existent river Mokra, and the Pabianka River and recalls from memory ephemeral rivers, such as the Mała in Konstancin and the Sztoła, an anthropogenic river brought forth (as water pumped out of a mine) and erased (after the mine was closed down) through human operations. He writes of dirty and smelly rivers that have sparked the local residents’ disgust and fear (for example, the Rokitka River) and of waters that have witnessed armed conflicts (for example, the Danube) and become national mass graves.

52 For more details, see Adam Robiński, *Pałace na wodzie. Tropem polskich bobrów* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).

53 Filip Springer’s *Mein Gott, jak pięknie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2023) is another interesting book to be mentioned in this context. A fictionalized report, rather than a reportage, it has landscape as its main protagonist and some of its plot unfolds by the Oder.

54 Maciej Robert, *Rzeki, których nie ma* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023).

55 In Polish, the names rhyme and are meaningful as *łódka* denotes a small boat, and *smródka* is a nonce word meaning a stinking one. (translator’s note)

Noteworthy is also a book-length reportage titled *Woda. Historia pewnego porwania* [*Water: A Story of a Kidnapping*]⁵⁶ by Szymon Opryszek, a graduate of the Eco-poetics School (Polish: *Szkoła Ekopoetyki*).⁵⁷ It spins a tale of a Polish reporter searching for a disappeared Mexican guardian of monarch butterflies. Wherever he starts looking, the theme of water surfaces. He writes about avocado plantations rapidly causing the dehydration of the area, just like the logging of fir trees, which help retain water in the ground; he talks of new forms of hydro-colonization of these territories, including the establishment of the gigantic corporate “digital capitalist archives,”⁵⁸ such as Google, and the buy-out of land by huge corporations. All this is embroiled in political dealings, bribery, the climate crisis, and drought.

The last of our examples is provided by *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* [*The Vistula: A Biography of the River*]⁵⁹ by the historian Andrzej Chwalba of the Jagiellonian University. His study brings together an array of issues related to the history of the Vistula, known as the queen of Poland’s rivers, which paralleled the history of the Polish state. In the book, Chwalba seeks to establish the role of the Vistula in Polish history. His narrative about the river references the legend of Krak and Wanda, the symbolic nuptials of the Wawel and the Vistula, and artistic images of the Vistula as a woman because the Vistula is undoubtedly gendered female and is represented as a woman, consistently with the ancient tradition, too.⁶⁰ Apparently, artists have tended to represent the Vistula as a young, attractive, and spirited female whose vitality invigorates the fossilized, conservative, and tradition-cherishing Cracow.⁶¹ Besides, like the other publications we have mentioned, Chwalba’s book portrays water’s relations with humans, who have sought to tame it, redirect its flows, and straighten its curving ribbons. The river streamlength was sometimes reduced in a natural way, as the Vistula transported immense quantities of sand, gravel, and pieces of rock, which were deposited in its distributaries, making them shallower and forming sandbanks; this not in-

56 Opryszek, *Woda*.

57 The Eco-poetics School was founded at the Institute of Reportage (Polish: *Instytut Reportażu*) by Filip Springer and Julia Fiedorczuk. Rather than training in creative writing, the School aims to foster and consolidate its students’ ecological competence, which is supposed to translate into their creative and occupational practices. The School invites people with some writing experience to help them make their mark on the public debate by introducing a new idiom and new manners of talking of today’s planetary crises into ongoing discussions. See <https://instytut.pl/manifest> [accessed 22. 12. 2023].

58 Opryszek, *Woda*, pp. 195–199. If the cloud were a country, it would be the world’s sixth biggest energy consumer, following the U.S., China, Russia, India, and Japan.

59 Chwalba, *Wisła*.

60 Chwalba, *Wisła*, p. 14. Besides, grammatically speaking, the Vistula is a feminine noun in Polish, as is the river.

61 Chwalba, *Wisła*, p. 16.

frequently resulted in remodeling the riverbanks.⁶² Chwalba also illuminates the relations between the Vistula and the medieval and modern cities and towns along it, explaining that, except Gdansk, they were as a rule not erected face-up to the river and that only the outskirts, populated by fishermen and the urban poor, were frontally turned to it. In partitioned Poland,⁶³ urban waterfronts in the Austria- and Russia-ruled territories were also the dwelling place of the lumpenproletariat. It was only in 1989 that the value of the Vistula's beautiful waterside began to increase.

In 2022 and 2023, a number of specialist aqua-themed texts were published in research journals. Notable examples included the special issues of the bilingual quarterly *Herito. Dziedzictwo, kultura, współczesność/Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present and Pismo. Magazyn Opinii*, dedicated, respectively to the Oder and water as such.⁶⁴

When discussing water, one cannot possibly fail to refer to artists, since art ever more frequently steps out of museums and galleries to provoke reflection on space. Notable among river-artists is Cecylia Malik, a Cracow-based activist whose work combines art, ecology, and social engagement.⁶⁵ Known for such ventures as *Warkocze Białki* [*The Białka's Plaits*],⁶⁶ *Wodna Masa Krytyczna* [*Water Critical Mass*] (in collaboration with Martyna Niedośpiał and Małgorzata Nieciecka), and *6 Rzek* [*6 Rivers*],⁶⁷ Malik is a robust female voice⁶⁸ in the River

62 Chwalba, *Wisła*, p. 31.

63 Throughout the 19th century, Poland did not exist as an independent and unified state, having been divided (partitioned) in the late 18th century by three neighbor countries: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. (translator's note)

64 *Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present* 2023, nr 50, <https://herito.pl/magazyn/herito-50> [accessed 12.01.2024]; Redakcja, "Jak zdobyć wydanie *Wokół Wody*?" *Pismo. Magazyn Opinii* 2023, June 21, 2023, https://magazynpismo.pl/idee/jak-zdobyw-wydanie-wokol-wody/?seo=pw&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA440tBhAOEiwAj4gpOaxmwp2iN5Jp4kOZvDjQ4EatsH1lA9ISvkXneikm47BMLQprFmCYkhoCPeoQAvD_BwE [accessed 12.01.2024].

65 On the intertwining of artistic, environmental, and socially involved practices, see *Cecylia Malik: Rezerwat Miasto*, eds. Martyna Niedośpiał and Aneta Rostkowska (Kraków: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Bunkier Sztuki – Towarzystwo na Rzecz Ochrony Przyrody), *Issuu*, July 29, 2014. https://issuu.com/bunkier_sztuki/docs/rezerwat_miasto9webii [accessed 12.01.2024].

66 *Warkocze Białki* [*The Białka's Plaits*] is an artistic project launched to save the Białka River from channelizing and dredging.

67 *6 rzek* [*6 Rivers*] is a cruise along Cracow's all rivers by a hand-made boat. That the Vistula flows through Cracow is common knowledge, but the city's other rivers are scarcely known.

68 Women are the first aquatic environment and an embodiment of Mother Earth. It is from women's bodies that relations between humans and water spring. We forge, nourish, and sustain connective relationships and interdependence through bodies. Women are water-bearers and, as such, fall victim to violence. The relationship between water and violence against indigenous populations is deeply disturbing. See Miguel Sioui et al., "Haudenosaunee Women's Water Law: Reclaiming the Sacred," in *Indigenous Water and Drought Management in a Changing World*, ed. Miguel Sioui (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2022), pp. 63–89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-824538-5.00004-2>.

Sisters (Polish: *Siostry Rzeki*) collective and focuses on the role of women in counteracting climate change and the water crisis. She observes that “mainly guys are in charge of rivers. They build ships, dams, and power plants. And we are here as a strong female voice in defense of rivers.”⁶⁹

In July 2019, the River Sisters activists traveled from Cracow to Gdansk by a traditional scow and held fashion shows on their way. A collection of bathing suits from recycled materials was put on display in Cracow, Warsaw, Torun, and the Hel Peninsula, with the participants of the demonstration serving as models.⁷⁰ The River Sisters also put on actions in defense of Europe’s last natural rivers, including the Vistula, whose future was (and still is) jeopardized by massive construction projects, such as the E40 waterway and a new immense dam on the Vistula at Siarzewo. The collective launched this happening-based campaign to publicize the demands of the Save the Rivers Coalition, which was founded in 2017 as a response to the government-plotted demise of the last natural rivers. The participants in these events were invited to represent their respective rivers: holding placards with the river names on them and convening, everybody dressed in blue, in the semblance of the Vistula’s numerous tributaries to express their outrage at the destruction of nature.⁷¹

Małgorzata Lebda is another artist of note. A poet and an ultramarathon runner, Lebda developed one of her projects around “reading the water” as a gesture of protest against the planned construction of the E40 waterway, which would produce disastrous consequences for the natural environment. Lebda ran about more than 1,100 kilometers from the springs of the Vistula down to its mouth, using her own body to explore the body of the river:

This is why I want to run by the body of the river in order to experience its presence, to have by my side something that leads, something that lets itself be discovered, something that I’ll be able to discover and turn into a tale. The river as motion. The river as experience. The river as history waiting to be discovered. The river as inspiration. The river as a testament to ourselves and as evidence.⁷²

Besides, the filmmaker Ewa Ewart tells in her latest film *Until the Last Drop* (Polish: *Do ostatniej kropli*) of rivers and people committed to saving them, who work to make others realize the weight of the problem. Her documentary is inspirational and kindles hope that the struggle for clean and healthy rivers is not

69 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, p. 196.

70 Cecylia Malik, “Fashion for Rivers,” <https://cecylialalik.pl/en/portfolio/FashionForRivers> [accessed 15.03.2024].

71 Cecylia Malik, “River Sisters,” <https://cecylialalik.pl/en/portfolio/RiverSisters> [accessed 15.03.2024].

72 Małgorzata Lebda, “Czytanie wody,” *Pismo. Magazyn Opinii*, June 2, 2020. https://magazynpi-smo.pl/idee/osobista_historia/do-zobaczenia-rzeko-wisla-malgorzata-lebda [accessed 23.12.2023].

lost yet. The rousing evidence the film cites to prove that it is worthwhile to stand up for rivers and that this struggle can be spectacularly effective includes the developments related to the Vjosa River in Albania. On 13 March 2023, the Albanian Minister of the Environment Mirela Kumbaro announced the foundation of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, even though her government had initially devised entirely different plans for the river. The documentary won Ewart the Prince Rainier III Special Prize at the Monte Carlo Television Festival. In her acceptance speech, Ewart warned that if we did not revise our treatment of our rivers, we would be in for serious trouble. On a more positive note, she added that we could do more and plenty of people were prepared to commit to that.⁷³

While the creative practitioners mentioned above are all women, the struggle for river in Poland is not gendered, as evinced by the work of Michał Zygmunt, Józef Drzazgowski, Daniel Petryczkiewicz, and Robert Rient, river whistlers, empathic activists, and water ambassadors, as they are.

Rivers regain their freedom

Today, a lot of people, including scholars and activists, deliberate what to do to ensure that rivers are safe. What must we do for the National Park of the Lower Oder Valley to be established? How can we help the Oder have legal personhood granted to it (as the first river in Europe)? Although the latter aspiration seems at odds with today's rapacious and expansionist civilization, it may be the only way to break a downward spiral to ultimate disaster.

Ecuador was the first country to make rivers, forests, mountains, and lakes legal persons. This happened upon the motion of Ecuador's National Assembly in 2008. Article 71 of the Constitution of Ecuador, which was adopted that year, states that nature has a right to have its existence respected and to sustain its life-cycles, structures, functions, and evolutionary processes. Each and every citizen of the country can act on behalf of nature.⁷⁴ The passing of this law was made possible as a result of espousing the indigenous perception of the natural surroundings of humans. Ecosystems are characteristically considered living and sentient beings by other indigenous peoples and in other traditional cultures as well. One year later, Bolivia followed in Ecuador's footsteps to make Nature a legal entity. The legal person status has been conferred on many rivers, such as

73 Katarzyna Oleksik, "Ewa Ewart otrzymała prestiżową nagrodę. 'Mam nadzieję, że przesłanie tego filmu wybrzmi głośno i wyraźnie,'" *Dzień Dobry TVN*, June 21, 2023. <https://dziendobry.tvn.pl/gwiazdy/ewa-ewart-otrzymala-nagrade-specjalna-na-festiwalu-w-monte-carlo-do-ceniono-jej-dokument-do-ostatniej-kropli-st7184158> [accessed 10.01.2024].

74 Political Database of the Americas, *Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador*, <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html> [accessed 22.12.2023].

the Ganges and the Yamuna in India, the Magpie in Canada, the Atrato basin in Colombia, and the Wanganui in New Zealand. The rejection of the subject-status of Nature by the Western world in the 16th century was one factor that paved the way for the later—local and colonial—exploitation of the Earth.

A call for conferring legal personhood on a river has also been articulated in Poland, specifically concerning the Oder.⁷⁵ At the request of the Oder Tribe, the lawyer Jerzy Bielak drafted a citizen-initiated bill of a relevant law.⁷⁶ It may be high time for the first river in Poland—and in Europe—to obtain legal personhood. Availing ourselves of the legislation adopted in other countries where rivers hold a legal person status, we propose a set of rights that the Oder should have:

1. The right to flow freely (meander).
2. The right to maintain biodiversity.
3. The right to be clean.
4. The right to have unregulated, natural banks.
5. The right to overflow in conformity with its natural cycles.
6. The right to protection (conceived of as the restriction and/or termination of activities that harm the ecosystem or put it at risk of harm).
7. The right to regeneration, to restoring the river's natural dynamics and adaptability.
8. The right to engage in legal action (the right to have legal proxies, the right to be represented in court by its “guardians,” that is, legal agents).

Rivers in Poland are protected by national and EU laws. However, no legal provision protects the natural status of rivers as a whole, including their closest surroundings. Małgorzata Smolak, a lawyer who specializes in environment protection law, points out that only some segments of nature are currently covered by legal protection, but that rivers as such are not sufficiently safeguarded by law. Smolak underscores that the tendency to grant legal personhood to rivers was spawned by the failure of all prior methods of river protection.⁷⁷ The attorney Karolina Kuszlewicz comments on this view by explaining that if rivers were recognized as legal entities, they could have a related right to sue and be a litigation party. Kuszlewicz believes that “the interest of the river would not be measured by the capitalist right of ownership or financial gain; instead, it would

75 Nasza Demokracja, “Odra jako osoba prawna” [a campaign set up by Robert Rient]. <https://www.naszademokracja.pl/petitions/odra-jako-osoba-prawna> [accessed 22.12.2023].

76 Osoba Odra, “Projekt ustawy o uznaniu osobowości prawnej rzeki Odry,” May 6, 2023, <https://osobaodra.pl/projekt-ustawy> [accessed 22.12.2023].

77 Mateusz Kowalik, “Bug tak chciał. Rzeki dostają osobowość prawną,” *Krytyka Polityczna*, March 9, 2021, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/swiat/bug-tak-chcial-rzeki-dostaja-osobowosc-prawna> [accessed 22.12.2023].

result from its recognition as a living entity, a self-contained being that deserves representation, offering chances of fair trial.”⁷⁸

We must begin to think of rivers as complex ecosystems, because water is not a discrete being; rather, it teaches mutual connectivity and showcases the interdependence of all components of the natural world. Flowing water is undoubtedly a living organism that enables thousands of other organisms to survive. By adopting this perspective, we would appreciate autochthonous wisdom about the management of natural resources without an excessive exploitation of them. Once ignored and considered primitive, traditional ecological knowledge⁷⁹ has been re-appraised today as a platform for practices and beliefs that can support us in designing alternative solutions, different from those applied now which are based on capitalist practices and hard science as a privileged mode of knowledge. Robin Wall Kimmerer, herself a member of the Potawatomi people, researcher, and botanist, explores the Native Americans’ tradition of relating to nature, their tales, dialects, and histories in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*,⁸⁰ where she cites a thanksgiving address to waters:

We give thanks to all the Waters of the world. We are grateful that the waters are still here and doing their duty of sustaining life on Mother Earth. Water is life, quenching our thirst and providing us with strength, making the plants grow and sustaining us all. Let us gather our minds together and with one mind, we send greetings and thanks to Waters.⁸¹

The principles of life embraced by indigenous peoples exemplify a protocol that might enable humanity to adapt to climate change. It is not without reason that Richard Powers, the author of celebrated Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory*, urges us to become natives again and love the Earth in the time of climate disaster.⁸² The world desperately needs new tales, including new aqua-narratives. Glenn A. Albrecht encourages us to espouse the Symbiocene as a new vision of

78 Karolina Kuszlewicz, “W Nowej Zelandii rzeka ma status osoby prawnej, by ją chronić. Adwokatką: ‘Zróbmy to z Wisłą!’” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 25, 2021, <https://wyborcza.pl/1,177851,27724527,w-nowej-zelandii-rzece-nadano-status-osoby-prawnej-by-ja-chronic.html> [accessed 22. 12. 2023].

79 We draw on the insights of Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka ekologiczna,” *Teksty Drugie* 2013, nr 1–2, p. 23; and “Traditional Ecological Knowledge,” *ScienceDirect*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/traditional-ecological-knowledge> [accessed 22. 12. 2023]; Sioui et al., “Haudenosaunee Women’s Water Law.”

80 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

81 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 311.

82 Richard Powers, *Overstory* (London: Vintage, 2019), pp. 360, 423–424.

the world; for her part, Donna Haraway makes a case for the Chthulucene.⁸³ Both conceptions adopt an optimistic lens to look at the world and plead for a good, communal, and mutually beneficial living-together of various species. Today, the symbiosis of the river and the city⁸⁴ acquires a new dimension and reverberates with questions about the future of rivers and their role and relevance to the city and its dwellers. However, we must bear in mind that a symbiosis is advantageous to all the parties involved. The belief that rivers afford us and our cities opportunity for further vibrant development is ever stronger and more widespread, yet we still only rarely ask what it is that we give rivers in return.

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

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83 For more particulars, see Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*.

84 For the idea of mutualistic cities, see Mark Williams et al., "Mutualistic Cities of the Near Future," in *Altered Earth: Getting the Anthropocene Right*, ed. Julia Adeney Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 232–228, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/altered-earth/mutualistic-cities-of-the-near-future/0C8E20D72D17913D85E1EEB9A9295862> [accessed 23. 12. 2023].

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Abstract

Resulting in the loss of biodiversity and anthropogenic climate change, the activity of *Homo sapiens*, combined with ignorance and inaction, leads the world to ruin. Rivers are the most affected part of the world and are among the most degraded ecosystems. In July 2022, an unprecedented ecological disaster took place in the Oder, Poland's second largest river. The tragedy of the yet-"untamed" river sparked a powerful public outcry in Poland and initiated a radical change in society's attitudes to rivers. We have again realized how important rivers were and still are in the operations of human societies. Since billions of organisms died in the Oder, plentiful events have taken place, including marches, happenings, conferences, and debates on the role of rivers in our life and the urgency of effective action to prevent similar disasters from happening again in the Oder or other Polish rivers. Today, many researchers and activists wonder what can be done to make the Oder safe. What do we have to do for the National Park of the Lower Oder Valley to be established? How can we help the Oder become a legal person (as the first river in Europe)?

Keywords: rivers, planetary boundaries, river regulation, renaturalization, ecological disaster, legal person, aqua-poetics.

Chubby Kate as the Hub of the Ecosystem: New Narratives of the Vistula

Roczniki, or Kronika Sławnego Królestwa Polskiego [*The Annals: Or, a Chronicle of the Illustrious Polish Kingdom*], the opus magnum of Jan Długosz, a medieval historian and chronicler of Poland, includes *Chorographia Regni Poloniae*, which ingeniously attempted to offer a hydrographic depiction of the Polish territory. Though not without its faults, Długosz's presentation of the country in terms of its river network makes for a compelling record that documents the viability of looking at space otherwise and accommodating an aquatic perspective. The idea to describe a state through the water system of its territory not only sounds original today but also, first and foremost perhaps, bears out the possibility of adopting a different viewpoint and surveying an area as a locus of linkages producing a dense mesh of rivers, which is like the circulatory system of the vast aqua-system.¹

We will not be too much off the mark to think that Długosz's narrative initiated two discourses on the Vistula—the longest river crossing the chronicler's homeland—in Polish historiography. Those are, as elucidated by Anna Barcz, the notions of the river as a practical site and as a symbolic space. Barcz understands the utility of the Vistula as the contribution of the river to the establishment of political boundaries, military actions, and economic pursuits, while binding its symbolic import to the representation of national history and the definition of Polishness.²

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- 1 Długosz's gesture was repeated by the curators of *Niech płyną! Inne rzeki Warszawy* [*Let Them Flow!: Warsaw's Other Rivers*], a show at the Wola Museum in Warsaw in 2022. As part of the show, old maps, drawings, plans, and photographs were compiled to produce a historical presentation of the capital's river system, inclusive of its no longer existent rivers and watercourses. In this way Warsaw's aqua-genealogy was reconstructed, reminding the visitors how immensely the disturbances in water management caused by the degradation of smaller watercourses affect the status of the urban environment. See Maciej Robert, *Rzeki, których nie ma* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023), p. 110.
- 2 Anna Barcz, Monika Gromala, and Paulina Waclawik, "Wisła akwakrytyczna: głębokie mapowanie źródeł literackich w perspektywie nowej historiografii powodzi (1934)," *Teksty Drugie* 2022, nr 4, pp. 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2022.4.2>.

The national narratives of the Vistula in school

These two narratives appear to be very much alive and fare well in Polish schools, while hardly inviting any critical examination. The Vistula is an object discussed not only in geography, biology, and history classrooms but also in Polish language instruction.

Starting in very early childhood, children learn the legends of the Wawel dragon, Wanda who would not marry a German, and the Varsovian Siren. In all of them, the action is set on or by the river, albeit in different cities. The former two take place in Cracow and picture the Vistula as, on the one hand, a helper and, on the other, an ultimate end of human choices. The dragon that harasses the Cracow population is vanquished because, trying to quench its thirst, it gulps water from the Vistula so voraciously that its monstrous body bursts from the excess. Wanda, legendary Krak's daughter and the ruler of Poland, refuses to marry the German duke Rytygier and having fended off his army's attack on Poland, commits suicide by hurling herself into the Vistula; she chooses death over exposing her country to new assaults from her cruel suitor. The legend of the Varsovian Siren tells of a half-woman half-fish, accidentally hauled from the river by fishermen and released back into the water, who promises to guard the safety of the Polish nation for centuries to come and to make the Vistula hum the stories of hope, power, and victory to the future generations in times of danger.

The agreement between people and a creature from the depths of the Vistula resulted in the Siren being made the emblem of Warsaw and its monument sculpted by Ludwika Nitsch in 1939 being placed by the Świętokrzyski Bridge on an embankment along the river. The monument complete with its plinth is six meter tall, though the design was originally bolder. Nitsch planned a 20-meter-high Siren statue of greenish glass to be put into the Vistula, rather than by the river. Lit up with floodlights from its bottom, the monument was to have bred high-minded sentiments around the homeland river (but also to have measured the rising tide). Bathed by the Vistula water and at the same time warning Varsovians against the risk of flooding, the gigantic glass monument was to have stood as testament to the legendary pact between the Siren and humans, ensuring the safety of the nation and preserving the memory of its glory.

Of course, there is more to the presence of the Vistula in Polish language classrooms than these three legends. Polish cultural narratives and, following them, educational ones as well, are eager to underscore the indigenous quality of the Vistula, which was a therapeutic factor in the context of Poland's dramatic history, including the loss of statehood for 123 years.³ The Vistula connected, and

3 Poland lost independence in the third partition in 1795 and regained its status as a sovereign state in 1918 (see note 12).

still connects, the south of the country with its north, and it flowed, and still does, exclusively within the borders of the Polish state. Poland's exclusive possession of the river crossing, basically, the entire country along the south-north axis (the Vistula is 1,047 kilometers long) and thus spanning vertically all the territory of the Polish Commonwealth (and then Republic) contributed to the Vistula being crowned the Queen of Polish Rivers.⁴ Hence, it is no coincidence that, accompanied by the Warta River, the Vistula is evoked in the lyrics of "The Dąbrowski Mazurka" (the national anthem of Poland) as an inviolable sign of Polishness. The popular song "Płynie Wisła, płynie" ["Along flows the Vistula"], inspired by Edmund Wasilewski's 1840 poem "Od południa stoi" ["In the South There Is"] reverberates with the belief that Poland and the Vistula coexist and that as long as the river flows across Polish lands, the Polish nation will retain its identity despite oppression from its enemies.

The natural topography of Poland seems to have supported the notion of the Vistula as a state-building agent. Przemysław Smolarek relates that

carrying its quiet waters across the whole territory [of Poland], from the south to the north, from the Beskid Mountains to the sea, [the Vistula] was the core of the country and its main thoroughfare. With its broadly branching tributaries, it bound Poland's fertile lands into one whole, and, flowing toward the Baltic, it was like a signpost showing the direction of the development of the future country.⁵

Poland's statehood was consolidated along the Vistula (with Cracow and, since 1592, Warsaw being the capital cities),⁶ and it was on the banks of the Vistula that key settlements, villages, and cities were founded, including Cracow, Warsaw,

4 The Rhine fulfils a similar function in Germany. Even though it issues from Swiss glaciers, the biggest river of Western Europe has acquired its symbolic meaning as a dividing line between the Germanic territories and the ancient Roman empire. The Rhine was thus a typical boundary river that gave protection against strangers. See Tadeusz Margul, "Święte rzeki świata," in *Rzeki. Kultura – cywilizacja – historia*, vol. 4, ed. Jerzy Kułtuniak (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 1995), p. 61.

5 Przemysław Smolarek, "Muzeum Wisły w Tczewie," in *Rzeki. Kultura – cywilizacja – historia*, vol. 1, ed. Jerzy Kułtuniak (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 1992), p. 153. Tellingly, the Siren monument on the Vistula riverside was placed so as to face the north, looking downstream toward the Baltic Sea and the greatest pride of interwar Poland—the port in Gdynia, a city founded in 1929 in response to tensions in the Free City of Gdansk (an autonomous city-state established in the aftermath of the First World War and, by the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, placed under the protection of the League of Nations, though the compromise did not satisfy either Poles or Germans). The interwar politicians' plans framed the Vistula as a strategic corridor leading to the Baltic, itself a symbolic "window onto the world."

6 Interestingly, as settlement developed, a fundamental change took place in the statehood-river relationship in the history of Poland; specifically, Gniezno, the oldest Polish capital, was not situated on a river, but when moved to Cracow and then to Warsaw, the metropolis obtained access to one. See Gerard Labuda, "Rzeki w dziejach narodów (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem narodu polskiego)," in *Rzeki. Kultura – cywilizacja – historia*, vol. 1, ed. Jerzy Kułtuniak (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 1992), p. 18.

and the Slavonic Gdansk, the latter famously described by Napoleon as “the key to everything.”⁷ As recounted by Andrzej Chwalba,

“it was owing to a woman—the Vistula—that Poland came into being, populous cities were born, and the prosperity of the country increased. It was owing to her labor [...] that fertile farmland and thriving pastures were formed. [...] Hence, the Vistula is the historical axis, the maker-mother, and the fecund mother of history in this area,” Wincenty Pol wrote in his *Historyczny obszar Polski [Poland’s Historical Area]*.⁸

The abiding belief that the Vistula is intrinsically Polish is embodied in the Rodło, a stylized drawing of the Vistula crossing Poland with Cracow marked on its line, which was designed in 1933 as an emblem of the Union of Poles in Germany (Polish: *Związek Polaków w Niemczech*) and adopted as a symbol of Polonia’s bond with the Motherland. Symbolically representing the Vistula course from the mountains to the sea, the Rodło expresses the unity of Poles and Polish territories.

While its name is derived from Proto-Indo-European *weis-, meaning free flow, the Vistula has morphed into “our” river,⁹ a property owned by a nation inhabiting its basin, identifying with its landscape, and, at the same time, as-

7 Stanisław Matysik, “Dzieje Gdańska,” in *Gdańsk, jego dzieje i kultura*, ed. Franciszek Mamuszka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1969), p. 74.

8 Andrzej Chwalba, *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2023), p. 13.

9 This status is by no means as evident for the Oder (Polish: *Odra*), which only appeared in the Polish imagination after 1945. Poland’s third largest river (following the Vistula and the Warta), the Oder flows not only in Poland but also in the Czech Republic and Germany. For a long time, it was a symbol of the Regained Territories (a former label of the northern and western parts of today’s Poland, granted by the provisions of the Potsdam Conference of 1945). As such, the Oder not only fails to be the country’s central artery but is additionally a border river, with the rhetoric of the Oder as a Polish river urgently crafted after the war. Its name is ambiguous, foregrounding its transgressiveness and unobvious belonging: “The German word *Oder* is a simple conjunction, meaning *or* – a great name for a river that is also a border. It’s easy to imagine standing on a bridge where someone demands we make a choice. This side or that side? This land or that, one language or another—which eagle, black or white? Which civilization, which mindset, which lifestyle?” (Tomasz Różycki, “The Trial of Water,” trans. Aga Zano, *Herito: Heritage, Culture, the Present* 2023, nr 50, <https://herito.pl/en/arttykul/the-trial-of-water-2> [accessed 29.03.2024]). Importantly, the word *odra* denotes “measles” in Polish, and this is an infectious disease that took a deadly toll on the indigenous populations of both Americas. As can be seen, the semantics of the border river bears less than favorable connotations both in German and in Polish, which is also corroborated by Długosz, who stated that the Oder owed its name to the plundering activity of its waters, which flooded the area, stripping people and forests of their possessions (the pseudo-etymology of “Oder/Odra” derived its name from the verb *odzierać*—to strip/rob/rip/abrade). However, as the eminent Polish linguist Jan Miodek suggests, the name might stem from the Proto-Indo-European word *uodr, meaning “water” (Wojciech Browarny, “Odra. Wrocławskie urzeczenie,” *Herito. Dziedzictwo, kultura, współczesność* 2023, nr 50, p. 69).

cribing its own temperament to the river.¹⁰ The landscape of the Vistula, in particular of its segment in Mazovia, a region in the middle reaches of the river, with its characteristic willows bending over the riverbanks and also fencing the highways, with which the river once competed as a travel route, is one of the most important images in the archives of the Polish imaginary of national space.

Why the Vistula in the 18th-century photoshop does not move us although its painter—oh, what a great artist he was!¹¹

The Polish memory of the Vistula is still influenced by the art of Bernardo Bellotto. Nicknamed Canaletto, he was an Italian painter who worked at the royal court of Stanisław II August from the mid-1760s, and today's education petrifies his legacy by having his paintings reproduced in almost all Polish and history textbooks. The paintings as a rule function as illustrations to add some appeal to the historical discourse on the epoch of Stanisław II August or to the account of Enlightenment culture and literature in Poland in Polish classroom. A critical reading of a Canaletto painting is rarely undertaken, as a results of which almost all students have seen one or another specimen, but almost none relate to them in any meaningful way.

Canaletto then. He earned a name for himself as a painter of cityscapes, so much so that his vedutas have long been central to the national memory of the capital's past and were used as documentary records when the almost annihilated Warsaw was being rebuilt from the wreckage of the Second World War. To paint his vedutas, Canaletto relied on a *camera obscura*, a simple optical device that helped him better see and reproduce objects on the basis of their reflected images. *View of Warsaw from Praga*, one of the twenty-two paintings of Warsaw

10 Esther Kinsky, a German writer, poet, and translator of Polish, Russian, and English literature, writes that, as a river, the Vistula, "situated by Warsaw," in the very middle of the East, was to her the opposite of the Rhine, and continues to say that to she wanted to venture deep enough into the foreign land to assure herself of that. Esther Kinsky, *Nad rzeką*, trans. Sława Lisiecka (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017), p. 148. For the English edition, see Esther Kinsky, *River*, trans. Iain Galbraith (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2018).

11 The phrase alludes to a well-known sentence from Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (a mandatory reading for secondary-school students): "Słowacki—oh, what a great poet he was!" (Polish: *Słowacki wielkim poetą był*). It is repeatedly uttered in an episode that takes place at school, reiterated by a terrified teacher as an ultimate argument against a student's declaration that the poetry of Juliusz Słowacki, a Romantic poet venerated as a national bard second only to Adam Mickiewicz, does not spark his admiration. The expression has become a commonplace and is often marshaled in discussions on obsolete education that fails to keep up with the changing world, is based on rote learning, and avoids critical thinking. Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Danuta Borhardt (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

and its surroundings he delivered between 1767 and 1780, is his most frequently reprinted work. It is still considered a unique and superb panorama of Poland's capital, the greatest one ever produced in fact.

The monumental canvas (172.5 cm × 261 cm) presents Warsaw cut through by the river, with the right-bank part shrouded in the shadow of a cloud above and directing the viewers' eyes less to the river and more to the impressive vista of a European metropolis across it. The city is a stretching mosaic of churches and palaces, whose dense and varied urban fabric is on a par with other capitals perpetuated by Canaletto before. Canaletto's cityscape of Warsaw resembles a histrionic stage-set arranged with spectacular effects in mind rather than a mimetic reproduction of what Warsaw really looked like in the 18th century.

Indeed, Canaletto's view of Warsaw is partly fabricated as it is painted from a perspective that one could not have at the time. Apparently, the royal painter could not produce his painting from the suggested riverbank vantage point, even though he placed himself right there, as the painting shows the artist at work in the company of the king himself. In order to obtain the view of Warsaw rendered in the veduta, Canaletto in all probability had a tall scaffolding built for himself and sketched Warsaw's panorama from the high, additionally employing the so-called hybrid panorama technique, which amalgamates various sequences of views and multiple vantage points.

Consequently, fashioned in 1770, one of the most important representations of Warsaw is in a sense a beautiful counterfeit, based on merging the most attractive sights in order to spin a narrative of a modern European country. The bitter irony of it all is that Canaletto accomplished his tour de force a mere two years before the first partition, which marked the onset of Poland spiraling down into the loss of national sovereignty for more than one century.¹²

In Canaletto's painting, the Vistula does not seem to be the major actor of the show. The pictorial representation of the city places emphasis elsewhere, and the broad, but tranquil water reservoir splitting Poland's capital into two works as a mirror that reflects the riverside architectonic arrangements and the sky, which takes up almost half of the painting. The expanse of the sky and the dynamic of the clouds effectively scale down the monumentality of the river, and Canaletto

12 The Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania was gradually partitioned between 1772 and 1795, when its neighbors: Russia, Prussia, and Austria seized portions of the country's territory in three rounds of annexations in 1772, 1793, and 1795. As a result, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years. Interestingly, images of the Vistula were then used in symbolic renderings of Poland's loss of independence. An allegorical sculpture of the Vistula by Hipolit Marczewski, which adorns the facade of a seat of the Warsaw Rowing Society (Polish: *Warszawskie Towarzystwo Wioślarskie*) at 19 Foksal Street in Warsaw, shows a woman (the Vistula) accompanied by three children representing the territory of Poland ripped apart by the three partitioning countries.

himself manipulates it to his best advantage; namely, the surface of the water makes it possible to compose a system of mirror reflections, reversed images, and chiaroscuro experiments, showcasing his artistry as a consummate painter.

Though in fact non-existent, the Canaletto-fashioned veduta is deeply embedded in Poles' imagination and meets the criterion of a "charismatic landscape,"¹³ but its actual relevance is rather scarce. Its craftsmanship can be appreciated alongside its accurate execution of details, but one hardly cares about it. The Vistula was treated instrumentally by Canaletto, with its resplendence lightening up the canvas, but this was for the most part a pretext for chiaroscuro exercises.

The biopsy of the Vistula: From the promenade down to the water, or how should the river be addressed in classroom

Now, our purpose is rather to redirect our attention radically and turn toward the river. The tendency of cities discovering their riparian status is robust in Poland. Launched in many urban hubs, the projects of riverside reconstruction or embankment revitalization are supposed to restore rivers to the residents, make riverfronts more hospitable and inviting to spend free time by the water, and to erect attractive built environment foregrounding the river as a key element of urban space. In our context, restoring the river to the city above all means making an encounter with the Vistula as a living river possible. As a result of the work carried out around the Vistula in Warsaw, many metropolitan residents say now that their city has a new, nineteenth borough.¹⁴ Although it is not featured in any map, the Vistula Borough is well-known to those that habitually come to the riverside boulevards. The idea of constructing those was promoted by Stefan Starzyński, the mayor of Warsaw from 1934 to 1939. The implementation of his project was nipped in the bud by the outbreak of the Second World War. Today's Vistula promenades are wider than those envisaged by Starzyński, planted over with lush greenery, and interspersed with benches, playgrounds, and cafes. Small watercraft can moor at the high quay. This design envisions the banks as a riverfront salon from whose elevation one can walk down and close up to the Vistula.¹⁵

13 Bohdan Jałowiecki, "Przestrzeń społeczna rzek," in *Rzeki. Kultura – cywilizacja – historia*, vol. 7, ed. Jerzy Kultuniak (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie 1998), p. 113.

14 Dominik Szczepański and Mateusz Waligóra, *Szlak Wisły. 1200 km pieszej przygody* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Otwarte 2023), pp. 197–207.

15 Dariusz Bartoszewicz, *Warszawski przewodnik wiślany* (Warszawa: Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego 2018), pp. 316–323.

Such a descent toward the Vistula, instead of an observation of it from the height of urban boulevards, would promote a different reflection on relations with the river of the kind articulated by Joanna Dembińska-Pawelec: “A river is a rupture in the continuity of earth, and because earth is what makes up humans’ home element, this rupture cannot but disrupt our existence in one sense or another.”¹⁶ Change in the rhythm results from changed orientation toward the river. As pithily observed by Mariusz Jochemczyk:

“Turning to face the River” means as much as “turning one’s back to the World.” The choice between the wobbly “exterritorial” element of the River and the firm existence “on the Continent” is always an ultimate one. Those who live “on the banks of the river” (or on the river as such) appear distinctly different from those who live at some distance from that river.¹⁷

The question is how Polish language and literature education can be made to turn towards the River. How can we try and engage in serious reflection on the Vistula, without ignoring patriotic education traditionally underpinned by Vistula narratives, but carrying it over into new contexts of the engaged humanities committed, as they are, to redrawing the disciplinary compass to include current issues of the environmental-climate crisis and to finding ways to overcome the sense of impotence spawned by the well-known narrative of the end of the world as we know it? In a new narrative, where should we place the human if the urgency to dismantle the anthropocentrism of the traditional narratives topples humans from their previously dominant position and promotes a different system, one founded on relationality, collective, and collaboration involving not only humans but also non-human beings? How should we look at the river if, as Ewa Domańska insists, “the pyramid metaphor with its hierarchical relations is [...] replaced by a metaphor of a web and nexus of relations, where various elements are interconnected and interdependent”¹⁸?

Of course, these questions must be asked not only about humanistic education, including Polish instruction. That education must turn toward the river is also the notion espoused by Joanna Angiel, a researcher of geographical education who encourages overcoming the dominant classroom-and-desk system by applying methods of coursework, or rather fieldwork, “about rivers, by rivers,

16 Joanna Dembińska-Pawelec, “Z nurtem kaskady. *Nad Aarą Jerzego Żuławskiego*,” in *Urzeczenie. Locje literatury i wyobraźni*, eds. Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), p. 117.

17 Mariusz Jochemczyk: “Super flumina Silesiae Superioris...,” in *Urzeczenie. Locje literatury i wyobraźni*, eds. Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), p. 177.

18 Ewa Domańska, “Współczesna krytyka antropocentrycznego i eurocentrycznego wymiaru historii,” in *Wprowadzenie do metodologii historii*, eds. Ewa Domańska and Jan Pomorski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 2022), p. 241.

and for rivers” so as to facilitate an intimate knowledge of rivers, establishment of relations with them, and engagement in action for them.¹⁹ Angiel points out the methodological dearth that plagues the earth sciences:

From the viewpoint of the natural sciences, rivers are so-called long-term structures. Values embedded in more stable and material components and signs, such as natural, ecological, and economic values, do not occasion a lot of difficulty. We will likely be in for more challenges when trying to identify immaterial, symbolic, and sacral values in the cultural space of rivers, along with their corresponding signs which are so to speak “ensconced” in it and which are subject to more rapid changes.²⁰

Angiel believes that an alliance of the natural and humanistic sciences resulting in interdisciplinary lessons of geography and Polish would be a proper response to the challenges inherent in “the riverside school.”

Time is certainly ripe for education—in particular, for humanistic education, where such themes have hardly been tackled so far—to explore people’s relations with water in order to better understand, as Barcz puts it,²¹ how complicated the conceptualization of nature is, especially in the Anthropocene, when the epistemological and ontological status of nature has changed. Given this, I propose augmenting the narratives that present the river in terms of utility and symbolism with a story of the Vistula not only as a living river that makes us receptive to the idea of the river as an agent and a subject that engages in relations with people, but also as a great ecosystem.

In this context, turning towards the river means feeling to be related to water, abandoning the anthropocentric hierarchies, and not so much seeing oneself “by,” “in,” “on,” or “with” the river as rather sensing that one is “from” and “of” the river. With this approach, rivers would be “complex couplings of artificial and natural forces—hybrid forms that are neither natural nor cultural, neither human nor non-human, neither social nor material, but are collectives or blends of all these elements.”²² In other words, the point is to see the river and oneself within the human/non-human ensemble proposed by Bruno Latour in *Politics of Nature* (1999),²³ to rethink one’s position, and, as Karen Barad insists, to be not

19 Joanna Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2016), p. 118.

20 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 48.

21 Barcz, Gromala, and Waclawik, “Wisła akwakrytyczna,” p. 15.

22 Andrzej Kowalczyk, Lucyna Sadzikowska, Marta Tomczok, and Paweł Tomczok, “Antropocenna Rawa. Akwafilologia rzeki przemysłowej,” *Teksty Drugie* 2022, nr 4, p. 33.

23 Bruno Latour, *Polityka natury*, trans. Agata Czarnaacka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009). For the English translation, see Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

“in” the world but “of” the world. Monika Rogowska-Stangret, a Polish researcher of Barad’s work, explains:

Being *of* the world means that there is no qualitative difference between us and the world to be buried for us to define our theory as anthropo-de-centralizing. Being *of* the world means also that the subject implodes: the world emerges from within the subject, and the subject from within the world, and the world from within the subject, and the subject from within the world... Finally, being *of* the world also means that we emerge from the world, become together-with-the world, and all aspirations—whether to unification, fusion, coming-together, or to separation, isolation, and narcissism—are immanent to the world and define it.²⁴

Turning towards the river would entail tailoring and practicing new narratives, ones suited to the needs of 21-st century education, which confronts the biodiversity crisis, river pollution, and water stress. This is certainly what Donna J. Haraway urges us to do when she repeats: “Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we *must* change the story; the story *must* change.”²⁵

Polish lessons can undoubtedly contribute to that in various ways, and prominently so by re-reading the literary classics which have long been a fixture in the core curriculum. Inspired, or rather enforced, by the environmental-climate crisis, the aquatic turn engenders new modes of reading and promotes interdisciplinary contexts, through which texts can be interrogated in currently relevant ways and/or explored for models that we may imitate, in this way responding not only to the need to revise narratives, but also to the imperative to rectify our daily practices. I believe that the effective remaking of the narrative to accommodate human/non-human alliances is predicated on humanistic education or, more precisely, on Polish instruction in which students are exposed to varied narratives and encouraged to open up to diverse perspectives. Marcin Napiórkowski is certainly right to note that “[e]ngineers study what the world is like. Humanists seek to understand how it is seen by people”²⁶ and, let me add, to depict that. The school as a reading laboratory is perfectly aligned with this pursuit.

24 Monika Stangret-Rogowska, *Być z e świata. Cztery eseje o etyce posthumanistycznej* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2021), p. 26.

25 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 40 (italics original).

26 Marcin Napiórkowski, *Naprawić przyszłość. Dlaczego potrzebujemy lepszych opowieści, żeby uratować świat* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2022), p. 256.

Reading the water: An aquatic re-interpretation of Bolesław Prus' *The Doll*

Bolesław Prus' *The Doll* (Polish: *Lalka*) is a very popular book, read by generations of secondary-school students in Polish classrooms. Published in 1890, the novel is acclaimed as a masterpiece of the Polish Positivism, a literary epoch concurrent with European Realism and Naturalism. Stanisław Wokulski, its protagonist, is a lovelorn wealthy tradesman and philanthropist from Warsaw, whose affection is not requited by the aristocrat Izabela Łęcka. Although the Wokulski-focused plotline seems to be central to the novel, in fact its major preoccupation is a cross-section and assessment of Polish society at the end of the 19th century. Through, so to speak, taking to account an array of characters from various social strata, Prus argues that the Positivist ideas of social justice, emancipation, and community have become empty slogans, and Warsaw, in which the action of the novel unfolds, comes across as a miniature of the corrupted world, which Wokulski intended to mend, at least to a modest degree.

One of the pivotal episodes in *The Doll* pictures Wokulski's ramble across Powiśle, one of Warsaw's poorest neighborhoods situated on the Vistula river-side. To reach that spot, one needs to go down toward the river. The direction and destination of Wokulski's stroll affords a pretext for a scrutiny of the daily life of Warsaw's most destitute population and of the water status of the queen of Polish rivers. Descending toward the Vistula, Wokulski heads into the 19th-century urban hell, which is defined by staggering social differences, indigence, and the pathologies it breeds. Wokulski likens Powiśle to a knocked-down ladder, a simile conveying his appraisal of the area as dead and dead-locked.

Powiśle is rotting away, beset by penury, diseased, and moldered. The nature of the place is superbly rendered in two popular Polish screen adaptations of *The Doll*. One of them is Wojciech Jerzy Has' feature film from 1968, and the other is a TV show directed by Ryszard Ber nine years later, in 1977. If the latter's presentation of Powiśle relies on the reportage technique and focuses on the local residents, framing their faces and figures so as to compile resources for a community sketch, the former paints a panorama, as picturesque as it is infernal, with decomposition as its axial theme. Some of the favorite items in Has' imaginary, heaps of garbage and animal skeletons are scattered around decrepit houses to conjure up a riverfront necro-landscape as a representation of Polish society in decay:

He walked along looking through dirty window-panes into dwellings, and absorbed the sight of cupboards without doors, chairs with only three legs, sofas with torn seats, clocks with one hand and cracked faces. He walked along and silently laughed to himself to see labourers interminably waiting for work, craftsmen employed only at patching

old clothes, women whose entire property was a basket of stale cakes—and to see ragged men, starving children and unusually dirty women.²⁷

The stroll and the observation culminate on the bank of the Vistula, a river from which Warsaw sourced its water:

Wokulski reached the Vistula bank, and looked about in surprise. Here, occupying several acres of space, was a hill of the most hideous garbage, stinking, almost moving under the sun, while only a few dozen yards away lay the reservoirs from which Warsaw drank.

“Here,” he thought, “is the centre of all infection. What a man throws out of his house today he drinks tomorrow. Later he is moved to the Powazki cemetery,²⁸ and then again from the other side of the city he infects those of his dear ones who are still alive.”²⁹

The sight of river-neighboring Powiśle comes as a shock to Wokulski. The realization that the capital, a metonymy for the country as a whole, derives its life-giving energy from a place without any future prospects, a garbage dump of the city, a composting unit blending things and people regarded as waste, redefines the Positivist vision of a healthy society founded on collaboration of social groups and strata and bound by supportive relations. Wokulski’s turn to the river not so much opens his eyes as provides him with evidence that the existing social structure is irreparable and must be fundamentally remade if it putrefies and is poisoned at its roots or, better, to continue aquatic imagery, at its sources.

Sitting on the bank of the Vistula, Wokulski contemplates its water. The sense of hopelessness, degradation, and shoddiness of Powiśle is completed by a bizarre veduta of Warsaw, which seems a reversed image of Canaletto’s cityscape. Prus’ depiction of Warsaw has none of the flair of the Italian master, who excelled in broad, panoramic perspectives. To emphasize the claustrophobia of Powiśle, Prus avails himself of a horizontal composition and narrows down space, enclosing it in the Vistula’s streambed as the river reflects the city situated on its both banks. Wokulski is looking at a Warsaw veduta, but his is not a direct view, but one mediated by water. He stares at the Vistula, yet not across it, and sees a reflection of the opposite bank, recognizing the red roofs of Praga and the greenery of Saska Kępa in the image on the surface of the water. The red and green spots contrasted with the bleakness of Powiśle produce a grotesque effect, only enhanced by the fact that Wokulski examines a reflection in the water, which

27 Bolesław Prus, *The Doll*, trans. David Welsh (Budapest, London and New York: Central European Press, 1996), p. 69.

28 The Powazki (Polish: *Powiazki*) is a Catholic cemetery in the north-western part of Warsaw. Between 1877 and 1881, the mortality rate in Warsaw hit a terrifying 36.8%, largely as a result of the consumption of contaminated water. When water mains and the sewer system were built, it dropped to 19.5%.

29 Prus, *The Doll*, pp. 74–75.

itself is an inverted image. Warsaw thus comes across as a city gone topsy-turvy, its order turned upside-down, distorting the social order and breaching the Positivist contract of building an equitable world. Perceived as the foundation of the social pyramid, Powiśle and the river turn out to be made of the most vulnerable individuals who live in dismal conditions, left to fend for themselves with no help and putting the entire social body at risk.

If we take ecology to mean a network of natureculture interconnections rather than just a science of nature, Prus' assessment of the social stagnation rendered in the images of the Vistula's contaminated and dead water³⁰ diagnoses not only social catastrophe but above all ecological disaster. Relationality principles, on which ecological thinking, sense of agency, and responsibility are founded, have been suspended, causing a deformation of the ecosystem of the city and the country. These predicaments are metaphorically conveyed through a broken and consequently abandoned barge, stuck in the Vistula. Catching a glimpse of the sunken scrap iron, Wokulski is overwhelmed by the deadness of the river and the neighborhood along it. In this episode, neither the river nor the barge symbolizes movement, freedom, or journey; rather, each brings to mind broken machinery. The motionless, standing water and a corroding machine submerged in it vividly reflect the collapse of the city and nature.

To bear on issues outside the novel's plot, the classroom interpretation of this passage in Prus' book needs a commentary channeling the juxtaposition of catastrophic landscapes in 19th-century fiction and images of the anthropogenic degradation of the environment. A different approach is also possible. Instead of amassing dreadful examples, it would be more productive to mobilize a new and refreshing naturecultural narrative about relations and connections, a story that overcomes the malaise of "dead water" by pitting an alternative configuration of interdependence against it. We need stories that remind us of universal connectivity, which will not be obliterated by any political decision or technological solutions. How about stories that actually cast this connectivity into relief?

30 This is how the Vistula is interpreted by Ewa Paczoska, a Polish researcher of 19th-century literature. See Ewa Paczoska, *Lalka, czyli rozpad świata* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2008).

What story does Chubby Kate tell?

Can the aquatic turn promote such narratives—stories that embrace, as Domańska puts it, “relational thinking [...], which underscores the interconnections, interdependence, co-being, and co-living of natureculture, the humans and the environment, human and non-human beings and entities”?³¹

In all probability, Prus cherished a like vision of a synergic world. Tomasz Sobieraj argues that Prus “emphatically dwelled on metabolism and energy flows as factors determining the life on the Earth,”³² which proved to be a concept of nature not far removed from the theory developed later by the American biologist Lynn Margulis, who championed the idea of the Earth-Gaia as a vast ecosystem comprising multiple diverse populations entangled in symbiotic relations based on mutual support and reciprocal services.³³

Turning to the river, shall we obtain relevant examples?

The river itself is likely such a supersystem, but it is worth its while to look for another object, one immersed in the river. Indeed, there is an eligible object of this kind, and the good news is that it is not a broken barge Wokulski eyes when brooding on the dead water, diseased society, and dwarfed Positivist plans of global amelioration. The object I mean is Chubby Kate (Polish: *Gruba Kaśka*).

The catchy moniker is the name of a system of water drawing, filtering, and monitoring that has served the whole of Warsaw since 1964. It is unique in Europe for being erected in the watercourse—the Vistula—rather than on land. A characteristic round building, somewhat reminiscent of a low, squat lighthouse, Chubby Kate works as a city well, pumping water for the two-million population of the capital from an under-bottom drainpipe system, which radially surrounds it like a plaited skirt.

The station inherited its name from its older and more traditional fore-runner, namely, a well constructed almost in the middle of one of Warsaw’s finest squares between 1783 and 1787 and given a popular girl’s name to emphasize that households were mainly supplied with water by women—in affluent families by maidservants, customarily called Zośka/Fifi or Kaśka/Kate by their employers. The post-war rebuilding of Warsaw from ruin saw the antiquified well find itself between the lanes of the busy Solidarność Avenue and, as a result, lose some of its original luster.

Its successor was placed amid the waters of the Vistula, the way Ludwika Nitsch envisaged her never implemented design of the Siren monument. Instead

31 Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka ekologiczna,” *Teksty Drugie* 2013, nr 1–2, p. 15.

32 Tomasz Sobieraj, *W sieci natury i kultury. Bolesław Prus wobec dylematów światopoglądowych swojej epoki* (Kraków: Universitas, 2022), p. 111.

33 Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 152.

of a green glass sculpture splashed by river-waves, there is a cylindrical, a bit heavy building (interestingly, covered in green siding) that supplies the metropolis with water and, in this way, nurtures and protects it,³⁴ like the legendary Siren promised to do.

The water-drawing method applied in Chubby Kate is internationally known as “the Warsaw intake.” Simply put, it involves collecting water directly from under the bottom through special drainpipes. Jan Mencel explains that “the system is based on the natural filtration of water, which is made possible by the fact that the stretch of the Vistula before Warsaw is a natural and unregulated river. Overgrown with vegetation, its sandbanks, islets, and natural banks form a powerful filter of pollutants.”³⁵ For this system to work effectively, Chubby Kate must be circled by special vessels called Thin Wojteks (Polish: *Chudy Wojtek*), which loosen and aerate the sandy bed, preventing the drainpipes from being clogged with clumped matter.³⁶

A counternarrative: Eight mollusks and two million people

How can we bring together Chubby Kate and Prus’ *The Doll*? My idea is to see Chubby Kate as embodying collaboration practices absent in the novel’s image of 19th-century society.

Intriguingly, the Vistula-immersed cistern has at its core eight mollusks rather than a powerful mechanism constructed by a brilliant engineer, though without a doubt such contraptions are plentiful in the system. The mollusks are swollen river mussels (*unio tumidus*), a common species of freshwater mussels living in Polish lakes and rivers, whence they are in fact sourced. They are extraordinarily sensitive to pollutants, which makes them perfect guardians of the purity of water for the two-million metropolis. When they sense something unsettling in the water, they shut their shells to protect themselves. This motion safeguards the security of the city.

34 As a pertinent local fun-fact, the name of a cult socialist milk bar that opened in Warsaw’s Bankowy Square in 1967 undoubtedly referred to the function of Chubby Kates as provisioners. (A milk bar denotes a simple, state-subsidized eatery offering affordable, unsophisticated, mostly meatless meals based on dumplings, noodles, and dairy products. Mushrooming under socialism, milk bars have been and still are hugely popular [particularly, though by no means exclusively, with students and senior citizens], though their number dropped drastically with the transition to the market economy; translator’s note.)

35 Jan Mencel, *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2023), p. 26.

36 Zdzisław Smoliński, “Gruba Kaśka,” <https://wislawarszawska.pl/gruba-kaska> [accessed 10.02.2024].

The mussels can be seen in a brilliant 14-minute-long documentary titled *Gruba Kaśka*, directed by Julia Pełka (2019).³⁷ The first frame shows the view of today's Warsaw as seen from the Vistula, which makes it easy to pair the movie with Canaletto's painting and the description of Powiśle in Prus' novel.

Then the voice-over narrative begins; we can hear Piotr Domek, a malacologist, that is, a mussel researcher, who takes care of the mussels in Chubby Kate. He confesses that from time to time he has a dream in which the mussels are dead and do not react to the poisoning of the water. This dream leaves him paralyzed. Domek later talks about his work. We can see him collect mussels from water reservoirs and select healthy individuals for a dozen-day stint of labor in monitoring water cleanliness. Having done their service, the mussels return to their natural habitat, replaced by new individuals. And the cycle goes on.

The interior of Chubby Kate where the mussels are placed resembles a gallery of modern art. The segment of the film showing the creatures at work is enveloped in majestic silence. The mussels lie on special plates in their aquariums, submerged in water and connected to a sensitive, albeit not very complex, system of a magnet and a Hall probe. All movements of their shells are recorded, and if detectors register any odd behavior, an alarm signal is sent out and the water supply to the city is shut off.

The malacologist's story encourages considering the river in different terms so as to see the Vistula in another context and another scale, without recourse to panoramic vedutas. What I mean is that the narrative of the guardian of mussels, creatures from the river, exhorts us not only to look at but first and foremost to look into so as to obtain an insight into the micro-world. The realization that the purity of water for two million people is monitored by eight mussels—non-human beings—is indeed a game-changer. It is not only about the 8:2,000,000 ratio effectively dismantling common beliefs about agency and efficacy; it is also about the alliance of humans, the river, and non-human creatures making us reconsider the system of relations that bind us together.

This is good news for the disconsolate readers of *The Doll*, infected with the mood of deadness and decomposition of the human-organized world. The mussel story reminds us that there are ready models of co-existence, just waiting to be discovered. Crucially, to discern them, we must, at least from time to time, relinquish our anthropocentric bias and let ourselves be swept away by the river. The image of guards enclosed in their tiny shells will then prove to be a fitting counternarrative to the dominant discourse of human power, wonderful in teaching a lesson of humility and making us aware, again and again, how thoroughly dependent we are on each other and how surprising our intertwinings may be.

37 *Gruba Kaśka*, 2019, dir. Julia Pełka, <https://vod.tvp.pl/filmy-dokumentalne,163/gruba-kaska,336289> [accessed 10.02.2024].

Haraway may indeed be right to insist that “we must be involved in *learning* and *remembering* the ways we might *have been* otherwise.”³⁸ Turning to the river, which opens up opportunities and possibilities to be “otherwise,” is a good path to take in our actions, provided that, when on the riverbank, we attentively listen to diverse stories, not only to the traditional, historical, and symbolic ones referenced by Barcz. Polish language education needs a “living river” capable of reminding us that we are not so much *in* the world as *of* the world and calling on us to do our homework in co-existence.

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

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38 Donna J. Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 172 (italics original).

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Abstract

The paper offers a survey of cultural narratives about the Vistula in Polish language education. I analyze the traditional interpretations of Vistula-themed cultural productions and confront them with the needs of 21st-century education in the wake of the biodiversity crisis, river pollution, and water deficit. Our times call for a critical dismantling of the traditional interpretations which have cast the Vistula as a national symbol. I argue that we need a new reading of the river that would bring together varied narratives. I take a closer look at Chubby Kate, that is, a well-known water intake on the Vistula in which the potability of water is monitored by mollusks. The Warsaw water intake ushers an entirely novel approach into cultural narratives of the Vistula, as it represents a nexus of the human and the non-human, which is fundamental to the blue humanistic model of thought. Highlighting such relations is critical to education amid the environmental crisis.

Keywords: aqua-criticism, the Vistula, Bolesław Prus, Chubby Kate, human/non-human, mussels, Polish language education.

The Bloody Water of the Niemen¹: The River as a Source of Drinking Water in Eliza Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen*

In “Twarzą do rzeki” [“Facing the River”], an epilogue to his *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* [*A Hydromystery: Who Takes away Polish Water and How to Reclaim It*] (2023), Jan Mencwel states: “Living with your face turned to the river combines [...] ecological and progressive ideas with the resumption of Polish traditions and even of our identity, if it makes sense to talk of such a thing.”² In Mencwel’s view, the public’s bottom-up return to rivers and by rivers offers a chance to salvage Poland’s wild rivers, which form ecosystems that are home to plants and animals and also reservoirs of drinking and domestically used water for us, people. Mencwel’s book makes it clear how crucial it is to take care of waters in Poland—of groundwater and surface water, of flowing water and standing water. With industrial plants draining sewage into rivers and causing the water table to lower, with progressing climate change, with droughts or, just the opposite, cloudbursts this change brings about, we, the citizens of Poland, should turn to face rivers, that is, acknowledge their relevance and begin to look after them so as to minimize the current and future ramifications of these extreme weather events and human-generated damage.

Facing the river may mean, for example, becoming enraptured with it, spending one’s free time by it, engaging in environmental activism, or making the river a theme of one’s art. In the belief that the status of Polish waters, including rivers, is an issue of relevance to the present and future generations, I propose turning to the river in school-based Polish education as well. In my view, this turn is part of “the turn to the Earth,” which Magdalena Ochwat explores in her

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1 The eponymous river of this paper is known by a range of names, with the “Neman” and “Nemunas” being perhaps the most frequently used variants in English. However, because the “Niemen” is used in the English translation of the novel discussed in this paper, this option is adopted throughout the text for the sake of consistency. (translator’s note)

2 Jan Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2023), p. 313.

“(Współ)myślenie w humanistyce. Literackie ekokształcenie w epoce antropocenu” [“(Co)thinking in the Humanities: Literary Eco-education in the Age of the Anthropocene”].³ Ochwat argues that:

Responsibility for what happens with and to the planet and living beings is one of the most important challenges that humanity confronts in the 21st century. The imperative of responsibility should be upheld by each and every human being, but it should first of all be binding to science and humanistic education, which are furnished by culture, therein literature, with suitable means for fostering a new type of subjectivity.⁴

One of Ochwat’s solutions is that, in primary-school Polish classrooms,

apposite passages from recent non-fiction should be read to shed a new light on mandatory school readings, which youngsters consider anachronistic and irrelevant to the challenges of the 21st century. The aim of such combinations is by no means a novelty. They are primarily meant to make students “discover” that old literature can spark discussion on the issues with which we grapple today, including climate change, the role of nature, and the relationality of the world.⁵

In this paper, I propose bringing together an old text—specifically, passages from Eliza Orzeszkowa’s realistic novel *Nad Niemnem* (1888; English edition: *On the Niemen*, 2014)—and selected excerpts from recent non-fiction, in doing which I subscribe to Ochwat’s idea, but transfer it to the secondary-school context. To start with, I examined *Ponad słowami* [*Beyond Words*], a series of Polish textbooks for high schools and technical secondary schools, published by Nowa Era, scrutinizing the selection of literary passages on and methodological approaches to water proposed by its authors. I found that even though *On the Niemen* is a book with a river in its title and the action set on and by the eponymous river, the textbook authors discuss passages from it altogether without encouraging students to consider either symbolic or literal meanings of the Niemen. This may raise some eyebrows, given that the novel’s plentiful depictions of nature, including the river, can easily invite analyses and interpretations in the spirit of the eco-humanities, and the authors themselves are not oblivious to the possibilities of linking old texts to the thematic concerns of the green humanities, as evinced by the section on the Romanticism (2.1 *Romantyzm*).⁶ The authors also recognize

3 Magdalena Ochwat, “(Współ)myślenie w humanistyce. Literackie ekokształcenie w epoce antropocenu,” *Polonistyka. Innowacje* 2020, nr 12, p. 33, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pi.2020.12.3>.

4 Ochwat, “(Współ)myślenie w humanistyce,” pp. 33–34.

5 Ochwat, “(Współ)myślenie w humanistyce,” p. 34.

6 An interesting and elaborate question follows William Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” in this section: “What are the most important challenges related to nature (the natural environment, natural resources, and climate) that people face in the 21st century? In your view, what should people living in various continents do in order to live in harmony with the natural world?” The following assignment contains a question on the impact of human industrial activities on wild nature in the Romanticism and today. Małgorzata Chmiel, Anna Cisowska, Joanna Ko-

the validity of climate knowledge in Polish classroom, which can be seen in the part on “our times” (4. *Współczesność*).⁷ This notwithstanding, merely one of the thirty-four questions offered as triggers for discussion on Orzeszkowa’s novel references nature as such:

In the radio broadcast *Te wstrętne lektury* [Those obnoxious mandatory readings], Grażyna Borkowska, a Positivist literature scholar, highlighted the role of nature descriptions in Eliza Orzeszkowa’s novel:

“These descriptions do have a function. Orzeszkowa meant to draw our attention to something.”

In your view, what roles does nature play in the world of this novel?⁸

The question is phrased in very general terms and can be answered in a plethora of ways, especially that the function of nature in Orzeszkowa’s novel has been amply discussed both by literature researchers and by the writers of sundry on-line “grade-saver” studies of *On the Niemen*, which, irrespective of their sometimes dubious quality, are eagerly consulted by young people. In pointing out the lack of nature-related questions pertinent to today’s ecological issues, nature-culture, human-induced climate change, and people’s responsibility for the environment, I do not mean to criticize the authors of *Ponad słowami*, or of any other textbook for that matter⁹; rather, I seek to underscore an opportunity for

ścierzyńska, Helena Kusy, Anna Równy, and Aleksandra Wróblewska, *Ponad słowami 2. Podręcznik do języka polskiego dla liceum i technikum. Zakres podstawowy i rozszerzony*, part 1 (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2022), p. 54.

7 In this part, the general introduction to the epoch directly mentions the anthropogenic climate crisis as well. See Joanna Kościerzyńska, Aleksandra Wróblewska, Małgorzata Matecka, Anna Cisowska, Joanna Baczyńska-Wybrańska, and Joanna Ginter, *Ponad słowami 4. Podręcznik do języka polskiego dla liceum i technikum. Zakres podstawowy i rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2022), p. 15.

8 Joanna Kościerzyńska, Anna Cisowska, Aleksandra Wróblewska, Joanna Kostrzewa, and Joanna Ginter, *Ponad słowami 2. Podręcznik do języka polskiego dla liceum i technikum. Zakres podstawowy i rozszerzony*, part 2 (Warszawa: Nowa Era, 2022), p. 98.

9 Two series of Polish textbooks for primary schools have recently been examined by Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska and Olga Przybyła. As their findings resonate with my ideas, I quote them at length: “The conclusions from our explorations of the core-curricular and textbook content imply that teachers of Polish have a significant role to play, as they must adapt the curricular requirements to addressing issues relevant to the environmental humanities in concrete classroom situations and on the basis of concrete texts. Both the general framework for Polish instruction and the assigned readings have a lot of potential in this regard, but more often than not it is the teacher that must deliberately inspire their reception along pro-climate lines. Indeed, as shown in our analysis, even though the direct curricular guidelines are modest in this respect, the available textbooks include ample interesting literature and some thought-provoking suggested assignments but, all in all, how much Polish instruction engages in ecology will ultimately be determined by the teacher.” Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska and Olga Przybyła, “Edukacja ekologiczna/klimatyczna w podstawie programowej i w seriach podręczników szkolnych do nauczania języka polskiego (jako ojczystego),” in *Edukacja humanistyczna V4 dla klimatu. Rozpoznania – dobre praktyki – rekomendacje. The V4 Hu-*

literature scholars and methodologists to develop updated interpretations and propose new ideas for tackling the “old” text that teachers (who rely on various handbooks) could use in classroom.

To explain, the current Polish core curriculum¹⁰ defines *On the Niemen* (selected passages or the entire book) as a supplementary reading for high schools at the basic instruction level,¹¹ which means that teachers may but do not have to include the book in their coursework. At the same time, because *On the Niemen* was chosen for the twelfth annual National Reading event (Polish: *Narodowe Czytanie*),¹² scheduled on 9 September 2023, popular interest in Orzeszkowa’s novel has remarkably increased of late. Schools participate in the National Reading by reading and discussing selected passages in classroom and/or presenting them at celebratory assemblies. Hopefully, the event will spark novel ideas on how to present the novel to various age-groups of students and encourage more teachers to choose *On the Niemen* as a supplementary reading.

manities Education for the Climate. Diagnoses – Best Practices – Recommendations, eds. Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska, Maria Waclawek and Zuzana Obertová (in collaboration with Ivana Dobrotová and Anita Račáková) (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023), https://wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/sites/wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/files/wus_2023_niesporek-szamburska_waclawek_obertova_educacja_humanistyczna_ebook.pdf [accessed 27.09.23].

- 10 See Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego z komentarzem. Szkoła ponadpodstawowa: liceum ogólnokształcące, technikum oraz branżowa szkoła I i II stopnia. Język polski*, p. 28, <https://www.ore.edu.pl/wp-content/plugins/download-attachments/includes/download.php?id=23134> [accessed 26.09.2023].
- 11 *Ponad słowami 2* suggests Zygmunt Korczyński’s conversation with his mother (in volume 3, chapter 2 of *On the Niemen*) as an episode to be analyzed and interpreted in classroom. Although the scene contains plentiful water metaphors, it does not feature the Niemen as such. See Kościerzyńska et al., *Ponad słowami 2*, pp. 92–95. Some passages from *On the Niemen* are correlated with a range of topics (e. g., patriotism, the old vs. the young, love, etc.) in *Oblicza epok [Facets of Eras]*, a Polish textbook published by Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, which proposes two nature-themed assignments: “Identify elements of nature and culture in this excerpt” and “Do the depictions of landscape in Orzeszkowa’s novel encourage you to explore the natural surroundings of the Niemen in more detail? Argument your answer.” These questions are rather superficial and not likely to initiate a discussion on the role of nature, the fluid line between nature and culture, or the urgency of knowing about and protecting nature. Dariusz Chemperek, Adam Kalbarczyk, and Dariusz Trzeźniowski, *Język polski. Oblicza epok. Podręcznik – liceum i technikum – zakres podstawowy i rozszerzony* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 2020), p. 171.
- 12 The National Reading is a nationwide campaign initiated by the President of the Republic of Poland in 2012. The campaign aims to disseminate the knowledge of Polish literature. Every year, one book is selected for the National Reading, and passages from it are read out in public venues, such as market squares and parks, on an appointed day. The campaign is supported by the Polish government officials, cultural institutions, libraries, schools, and private individuals in Poland and abroad. For more information, see <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/inicjatywy/narodowe-czytanie> [accessed 27.09.23]; see also <https://www.gov.pl/web/southafrica/national-reading-campaign-2023-in-south-africa--nad-niennem-by-eliza-orzeszkowa> [accessed 27.09.23].

This prospect makes devising new approaches to this old text all the more warranted.

In this paper, I heed Mencwel's call to face the river and, to this end, I look into selected passages in Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen*, which show the Niemen as a source of drinking water for the inhabitants of the village of Bohatyrowicze (one of the novel's settings). I will link the issue of obtaining water for domestic purposes to excerpts from very recent Polish non-fiction: Mencwel's *Hydrozagadka* and Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's *Chłopki [Peasant Women]* (2023).

The meanings of the Niemen

Today, the Niemen traverses the territories of Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia, but it was situated within the borders of Poland in the interwar period.¹³ A trip to the areas described by Orzeszkowa is not an easy venture now. The present-day village of Bohatyrowicze, the ravine of Jan and Cecylia (the founders of the Bohatyrowicz family), and the part of the Niemen watercourse featured in the novel are located in Belarus, a country with which Poland has rather strained political relations at the moment, to put it mildly. If a journey in the footsteps of Orzeszkowa and her characters seems a risky business today, we can safely read papers, blogs, and books reporting peregrinations in this region.¹⁴

13 Anna Nałkowska expertly and fondly describes the Niemen River in her *Geografia Polski [The Geography of Poland]* from 1920: "The Niemen, a river of Lithuania, splashes a portion of the lake district and of the Baltic Lowland. The river starts its course in wooded marshlands and flows, curving, westward within its sandy banks, gathering the waters of the lake district. In the latter half of its watercourse, the Niemen arches toward the Pripyat basin, with which it is connected via the Ogiński Canal [...]. Further on, the Niemen turns northward, entering its middle stretch. In this part, the river cuts across the lake district, carving a gorge in it and winding copiously [...]. These meanders are called loops, with the Birshtany Loop, the most important of them, circling round a peninsula which is only linked to the mainland by a thin neck and was once famous for royal hunting: game was driven through the neck into the peninsula like into a sack. In these reaches, the banks of the Nieman are steep, picturesque, and deeply furrowed by water, which streams down the precipitous slopes like mountain creeks. At the end of its middle stretch, the Niemen is fed by its largest tributary, the Neris, which flows across a charming dale [...]. At the mouth of the Neris, the Niemen again turns westward and, passing the swampy Baltic Lowland, splits into numerous streams, forming islets and shallows; at its mouth, the Niemen, like the Vistula, bifurcates into a delta and drains into the Curonian Lagoon through several channels." Anna Nałkowska, *Geografia Polski* (Warszawa, Poznań, Łódź, Lublin, and Wilno: Wydawnictwo M. Arcta, 1920), pp. 17–18, <https://rcin.org.pl/igipz/dlibra/publication/17715/edition/47401/content> [accessed 26.09.2023].

14 See Ryszard Pawłowski, *Niemy Niemen. Dalsze losy prawdziwych bohaterów "Nad Niemnem"* (Białystok: PCPapier, 2019); Agnieszka Zielińska, "Szlakiem Elizy Orzeszkowej," February 17, 2014, <https://mojepodrozneliterackie.blogspot.com/2014/02/szlakiem-elizy-orzeszkowej.html> [accessed 26.09.2023].

The papers on *On the Niemen* in which the meaning of the river is explored usually cite some lines from Adam Mickiewicz's poem starting with "O Niemen, home river of mine" (Polish: "*Niemnie, domowa rzeka moja!*"¹⁵). It is quoted, for example, in Józef Bachórz's "Symbolika Niemna w eposie powieściowym Orzeszkowej" ["The symbolism of the Niemen in Orzeszkowa's epic novel"], a paper which is itself frequently invoked in later studies of the book. Bachórz depicts Orzeszkowa's Niemen as "the life-giving river of the land," which "flows centrally across the native space"¹⁶ and is "framed as a touchstone," because it is from attitudes to the river and feelings for it (in today's parlance, relationship to and with the Niemen) that "civic humanity and conscience" spring.¹⁷ Bachórz also observes that Orzeszkowa chose the riverbank for the site where her heroine, Justyna Orzelska, experiences pivotal moments not only in the progression of her affection for Jan Bohatyrowicz, but also in "learning the truth about the life of the people and the nation and learning to take part in the life of the motherland."¹⁸ Bachórz insists that the episode in which the protagonists visit the grave of Jan and Cecylia transfigures the Niemen into a sacred sphere that will soon have one more function: that of a witness to Justyna's and Jan's mutual confessions of love.¹⁹

Bachórz notes that "the images of the Niemen appear at least on fifty occasions in the novel, and, as the plot advances, they expand more and more, acquiring increasing vividness and color and becoming saturated with ever weightier historical implications."²⁰ In the last paragraph of his study, Bachórz calls the Niemen a guardian of the "sepulchral seeds of revival."²¹ Clearly, Bachórz abandons the real Niemen to focus on the symbolic Niemen. On this model, the river is no longer a river as such but morphs into yet another national metaphor.

Other meanings of the Niemen, or rather of nature, are gleaned from the novel by Jerzy Cieślowski, who argues that:

In conformity with the laws of the epic, nature—the forest, fields, the Niemen, the "countryside"—fulfils an autonomous function in the novel as an embodiment of hieratic gravity and permanence, primevally preceding the human and, in its basic

15 Peter K. Gessner's English translation of Mickiewicz's poem is available on-line (see <http://info-poland.icm.edu.pl/classroom/mickiewicz/poem.html> [accessed 26.09.2023]). It was not suitable for the purposes of this paper, so the line is provided in translation by the translator of this volume.

16 Józef Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna w eposie powieściowym Orzeszkowej," in *W świecie Elizy Orzeszkowej*, ed. Halina Bursztyńska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe WSP, 1990), p. 110.

17 Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna," p. 111.

18 Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna," p. 113.

19 Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna," p. 115.

20 Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna," p. 112.

21 Bachórz, "Symbolika Niemna," p. 116.

sense, independent of the human civilizing pursuits. [...] For its part, nature untouched by the human hand—the towering forest, the primordial river—affirms the ontological authenticity of humans.²²

Cieślkowski draws on Mircea Eliade’s terminology to call the Niemen an “infantile epiphany,” that is a “manifestation of divinity.”²³

A range of other meanings of the Niemen are illuminated by Joanna Sztachelska:

The Niemen was given a specifically designed function of a “home river,” which constantly accompanies “the works and days” and is a symbol of time and a road that opens onto the unknown. The great water harbors ambivalent meanings; it is the mystery of human civilization and a life-generating artery of the Niemen land, but it likewise represents an ever-invincible elemental force. All the good and beautiful things happen by the Niemen in the novel [...]. Yet it seems that the fundamental and most salient function of the Niemen in the novel’s landscape is that it emanates bizarre power as a constant sign of transcendence, a sign of God’s presence.²⁴

Bachórz’s, Cieślkowski’s and, Sztachelska’s interpretations overlap in perceiving the Niemen as the center and the sacred in the novel, making sense of the river in ways entirely unrelated to practical life concerns. Without dismissing these insights, and consistently with my commitment to face the river, I investigate the Niemen not through the lens of symbols, but as flowing water in order to analyze some passages referencing the river that have so far been neglected even though they bear out the life-giving quality of the Niemen indicated by both Bachórz and Sztachelska.

Life-giving bloody water

Mentioned above, the visit to the ravine of Jan and Cecylia tends to be interpreted as one of the two episodes that crucially trigger the ideological awakening of Justyna Orzelska, a twenty-four-year-old relative and ward of Benedykt Korczyński, the owner of the Korczyn estate. The other episode, which takes place in volume 2, chapter 4, relates Jan and Justyna traveling to the grave mound²⁵ and intertwines several important thematic and conceptual threads: the patriotic (the grave mound is a mass burial place of forty January insurrectionists), the amo-

22 Jerzy Cieślkowski, “*Nad Niemnem* Elizy Orzeszkowej: rozważania nad semiotyką mitów religijnych,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1969, nr 60 (2), p. 80.

23 Cieślkowski, “*Nad Niemnem* Elizy Orzeszkowej,” p. 80.

24 Joanna Sztachelska, “*Nad Niemnem* jako epopeja kresowa,” in *Wokół “Nad Niemnem”*, ed. Joanna Sztachelska (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2001), p. 119.

25 See Cieślkowski, “*Nad Niemnem* Elizy Orzeszkowej,” p. 72.

rous (Jan kisses Justyna for the first time and though only on the hands, he does so with “ardent lips”), the ideological (Justyna’s beliefs are given a formative thrust), and the nature-related planes.

The characters set out to the grave mound in a boat. It is the first time Justyna has been on the river. The Niemen is still calm, so both the characters and the readers can closely inspect the fluvial landscape, which Orzeszkowa evocatively depicts:

They paddled slowly upstream. Above the river a bare yellow wall, with the motionless forest at the top, rose on one side; on the other, there was the high green hill with the gray and white houses of the village at the top, with their gardens, their shining windows, and smoking chimneys, strung out like beads one after the other as they emerged from the green of massive trees and translucent groves. From each of the houses a beaten path ran down to the river and an etching of multi-directional white lines covered the green humps and plateaus of the brow of the hill.²⁶

The sentence concluding this description of nature and culture, or, basically, natureculture is indeed striking. It speaks volumes about the kind of life the inhabitants of the Bohatyrowicze village live, but it has mostly been neglected by Orzeszkowa scholars. The paths that form a mesh of white lines stretching from each farmhouse down to the river are the approaches that the dwellers (women rather than men as will be discussed below) daily take to fetch water from the river.

When Justyna Orzelska talks with Jan Bohatyrowicz for the first time, he is plowing the field with a plow drawn by two horses. In the conversation, he says, half matter-of-factly and half boastfully: “For me to plow an acre is practically like going for a walk.”²⁷ Having finished his work, he offers to escort Justyna to the manor house and, as they walk, the girl catches a glimpse of a farmhouse that enchants her. Described as “the rather small and humble tableau of a country cottage, which yet seen up close seemed to exert on her today the charm of peace and freshness,”²⁸ the alluring abode turns out to be the dwelling place of Jan, his half-sister, and uncle Anzelm. Jan invites Justyna inside, which occasions a longer description of the Bohatyrowicz homestead. Orzeszkowa’s vignette is very pictorial and gives a good idea of what the cottage, the barn, the orchard, the vegetable garden, the flowers, and the bee yard look like. To modern readers, the depiction brings to mind a snapshot of an openair museum, where the time has stopped and the pace of life is slower and more peaceful. All this cuts an idyllic picture that seems to portray rural life as easy and pleasant. Up to a point,

26 Eliza Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, trans. Michelle Granas (Printed in Great Britain by Amazon: 2014), p. 242.

27 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 105.

28 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 110.

however, since this impression is dispelled as soon as Jan's young sister enters the stage:

“Antolka! Antolka!”

He was calling a young girl, who, in a short skirt and pink caftan, appeared barefoot over the hill, carrying on her shoulders a water pole with two full buckets of water. Thin and frail, she leaned a bit to the side under the weight and held one arm far out to the side to keep her balance.²⁹

A water pole (or a carrying/shoulder pole; Polish: *koromysło*) is “a wooden, arch-shaped yoke with two hangers for buckets or cans, which is carried on one's shoulders.”³⁰ In the episode, the skinny Antolka has just brought in two buckets of water, but where the water comes from is not mentioned. Accustomed to having water from the tap available all the time, today's readers may easily fail to ask this question or to realize that they are in the middle of an important scene that will go on after Antolka has taken the water pole off her shoulders. When she joins Justyna, Jan, and uncle Anzelm, the manor lady asks:

Justyna, looking at the willowy, scarcely grown-up girl, remembered the water pole and the two heavy buckets of water which she had seen on her back a moment before. “Isn't it hard to carry water up such a high hill?” she asked quietly.

“Not at all!” Antolka whispered back, twisting the edge of her apron in her fingers.³¹ “Ours is bloody water,” Anzelm interjected, “you go downhill to get it and have to carry it home uphill.”³²

The italicized sentence crucially indicates that Anzelm's moniker of “bloody water” (Polish: *krwawa woda*) refers to the water the girl has fetched in the buckets. Orzeszkowa does not directly state that Antolka brought the water from the river—from the Niemen—but this goes without saying for any attentive reader. As early as in the first paragraph of chapter 1, the Bohatyrowicze farmhouses and the Korczyn manor house are described as situated on the high bank

29 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 119.

30 Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vol. 1, ed. Józef Bachórz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2009), p. 179, no. 70. In this footnote, Bachórz states that the original term (*koromysło*) comes from Belorussian or Ukrainian. Elżbieta Koniusz also attributes the loanword to the same source; see Elżbieta Koniusz, “Polszczyzna kresowa w *Nad Niemnem*,” in *W świecie Elizy Orzeszkowej*, p. 259.

31 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, pp. 121–122.

32 Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vol. 1, p. 179, (emphasis mine). Michelle Granas' translation is on the whole skillful and competent, but it misses out on the meaning of *krwawa woda* (bloody water), a phrase that recurs in the novel and is axial to this paper. In the translation, water is alternately depicted as “red” or “rusty,” suggesting an actual color and possible contamination, rather than conveying the metaphorical meanings of “bloody,” which are elucidated further in the argument. For this reason, all the lines containing the expression “*krwawa woda*/bloody water” are given in translation by the translator of this volume. (translator's note)

of the river,³³ which Justyna later surveys on the way to the grave mound to notice the grid of paths extending from the homesteads down to the river. The “life-giving” Niemen does not dispense its water for free; one needs to walk down to the river to haul it and then climb up all the way back, carrying the filled buckets. The phrase “*krwawa woda*/bloody water” triggers associations with bloody sweat³⁴ and what is referred to in Polish as bloody toil, effort, or drudgery (corresponding to backbreaking labor in English).³⁵ To clarify, the adjective “*krwawy*/bloody” has a range of metaphorical meanings in Polish besides its literal denotation. The *Wielki słownika języka polskiego* [Great Dictionary of Polish Language] lists “*krwawy*” in the sense of “beyond one’s strength” or “demanding excessively hard effort”³⁶ and also of “unpleasant” or “particularly painful or harsh.”³⁷ The daily duty of going down to the river to fetch water home was both exhausting and irksome. Presumably, this was women’s chore.

The continuation of the conversation on “bloody water” in *On the Niemen* is much-revealing in this respect:

“Ours is bloody water,” Anzelm interjected, “you go downhill to get it and have to carry it home uphill.”

“And, particularly in winter, I carry water more often than she,” said Jan, as if exculpating himself.

“He brings it more often than I,” affirmed his sister, raising her head and looking at her brother. “But,” she added quickly and with growing embarrassment, “I can do it too—why not? I’ll be reaping for the second year this summer.”³⁸

Tellingly, the narrator points out that Jan is, so to speak, apologetic about carrying water as if it were an untypical, perhaps even unbecoming and shameful,

33 “On one side of the horizon, small hills darkened by woods and groves rose, while on the other, the high bank of the Niemen was a sandy wall growing out of the green ground and cut off from the blue sky by a crown of dark woods; its giant half-circle embraced a broad smooth plain [...]. Against this magnificent backdrop, it was possible to make out, faint in the distance, the outline of a large manor house and, along a straight line not far from it, a row of several dozen small houses, disappearing slightly into the half-circle of the river bank. This was a string of larger and smaller human habitations, whose dark profiles protruded from larger and smaller gardens.” Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 9.

34 “Bloody sweat: huge effort, almost beyond a person’s capacity.” Entry: “Krwawy pot,” in Piotr Żmigrodzki, ed., *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/22244/krwawy-pot> [accessed 27.09.23].

35 See the “Połączenia” tab, entry: “Krwawy, 3. ponad siły,” in *Wielki słownik*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/22154/krwawy/4896629/ponad-sily> [accessed 27.09.23].

36 Entry: “Krwawy, 3. ponad siły,” in Żmigrodzki, ed., *Wielki słownik*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/22154/krwawy/4896629/ponad-sily> [accessed 27.09.23].

37 Entry: “Krwawy, 4. przykry,” in Żmigrodzki, ed., *Wielki słownik*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/22154/krwawy/4896630/przykry> [accessed 27.09.23].

38 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 121.

thing to do for a male. That water for people and some farm animals to drink,³⁹ for cooking, washing up and maybe washing, too, was fetched from the river by women in the village of Bohatyrowicze can be inferred from an extensive passage in the following chapter of the novel. Late in the afternoon, briefly before sun-down, Justyna walks back to the Korczyn manor house via the Bohatyrowicze countryside. She can see women at work in homes and farmsteads, as they feed the poultry, weed vegetable patches, wash the dishes, pick vegetables, grind at the handmill, work looms, and stump along with “buckets of water on their shoulders.”⁴⁰ For their part, men head home from the fields and meadows with their plows, scythes, and rakes, while boys lead horses to “their evening feed.”⁴¹ Almost everybody is busy, and the division into women’s and men’s work is explicit. Water-carrying was a woman’s chore, and how onerous and draining a duty it was is borne out by Mrs. Fabian, Anzelm’s neighbor, who explains in volume 3, chapter 2 (long after the Antolka scene) that:

I’m creaking... continually creaking, but that doesn’t matter, a creaking tree lives longer! [...] you know, sir, what turned my health into a dry forest... I worked so hard, I carried water up the hill...⁴² *that bloody water was my worst undoing...*⁴³

In volume 2, chapter 3, “bloody water” is mentioned again. Anzelm’s remark to young Witold Korczyński, Benedykt’s son and an agronomy student who wants to reform the village not only by buying modern machinery, but also by educating the villagers, implies that there is altogether no well in the village, which makes it necessary to go down the hill to the river to fetch water:

I’ve heard a little something or other about your various talks with people and the advice you give. Oh, yesterday Walenty came to me and said that you were trying to persuade people⁴⁴ *to come together and dig some four wells in the neighborhood, and our water wouldn’t be so bloody.*⁴⁵

Obtaining drinking water, an indispensable thing at home and on the farm after all, is a steep challenge to the Bohatyrowicze dwellers. This detail may suggest the backwardness of the village, which has gone unnoticed by the researchers of the novel so far. No other chores, whether feminine or masculine, are described by

39 In fact Orzeszkowa never depicts how the livestock is tended to, so the daily practices involving chickens, ducks, cows, or pigs remain a conjecture. There is only an episode in which Jan brings home his horses, unharnesses them, and gives them oats and water. See Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 112.

40 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 128.

41 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 129.

42 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 358.

43 Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vols. 2–3, ed. Józef Bachórz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2009), p. 312 (italics mine).

44 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 236.

45 Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vol. 1, p. 132 (italics mine).

Orzeszkowa quite the way she writes about the carrying of water. Harvesting the grain in summer heat, though arduous and toilsome, has something of a joyful and elevated festivity to it, whereas the daily errands with a water pole are invariably “bloody.”

If Orzeszkowa portrays living by the beautiful and stately Niemen as peaceful, honest, industrious, ethical, and moral, the image she conjures is not one of an idealized arcadia. Interestingly, water-carrying women, whose excessively hard work is acknowledged by Witold Korczyński, also feature in the TV series *Nad Niemnem* based on the novel. I find it compelling that in his aspirations to reform his native area, the young man first wants to have a well dug in the village and then envisages building a mill, which would—literally and metaphorically—take a considerable burden off (mainly) girls’ and women’s shoulders.

Bloody water and living water

Let us go back to the protagonists’ trip to the grave mound in volume 2, chapter 4. When, having visited the place, Justyna and Jan return to the boat, she tells him about her life with her parents and at the manor house. She primarily focuses on her being suspended between two worlds—of poverty and of affluence—and on feeling useless and vexed with permanent inaction. Jan pithily encapsulates Justyna’s life at the Korczyński estate and, in doing so, evokes the hardships of supplying a farmstead with water. His choice of this particular chore in this context comes across as profoundly meaningful:

A child or an old person, that’s different, but how you could bear it to this period, miss, astonishes me... because, praise God, *health and strength are practically shining from you, and it would seem that if you had to carry a bucket of water, you would surely be able to...*⁴⁶

In response to this remark, Justyna “laughed and replied that she *would certainly be able to carry water*, since Antolka, a child who was almost half her slenderness, was able to carry it.”⁴⁷ As a reminder, Justyna is a young lady from the manor house who was not brought up to work or trained in any labor. At Korczyn, her only duties are to look after her absent-minded father and make music with him (she plays the piano, and he, the violin). I view Justyna’s statement as a pointed declaration, as a message meant for Jan, for whom she has a fondness and who she can see has an affection for her. By asserting that she is capable of carrying water buckets, Justyna also asserts that she is ready to live with him in a village

46 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 260 (italics mine).

47 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 260 (italics mine).

cottage and do chores that other village women do. In the preceding chapter, Justyna actually joined the Bohatyrowicze population in harvest and took a brief lesson in turning the handmill.⁴⁸ She showcased her strength, skill, ability to learn quickly, and preparedness to work hard. Now, after visiting the grave mound, as she takes stock of her pointless life at the manor house, she professes that she is not afraid of water-carrying, the most grueling chore that makes one sweat blood.

Justyna's confession is followed by Jan's. He admits that his fascination with her stemmed from curiosity. The point is that people "talked" about Justyna, who was in love with and was abandoned by her cousin, Zygmunt Korczyński. A wealthy and inspiring painter, Zygmunt could not possibly marry an impoverished young woman. Of course, all the neighborhood knew of the unfortunate relationship. Jan admits that "the first cause of his friendship for her was that he recognized that sadness and sorrowing in her."⁴⁹ Interestingly, when Jan thinks of Justyna, he thinks of water as well:

Sometimes he wondered that God had made her so beautiful and placed her so high, but hadn't given her happiness. And as often as he thought about it, it was as if melted wax dropped into his heart; it made him feel such pain and such a desire to cry. If he were able, he would throw over everything for her and *go to the end of the world to get a healing water for her*, he felt so sorry for her. *But such waters only appeared in stories and there weren't any in the real world.* So whenever he saw her, afterwards he only sang, or wanted to sing, that song:

A girl came lonely, my sole and only
Like a rose in flower
Now her eyes are brimming, and her hands are wringing
Her world changed that hour...⁵⁰

Jan does not have the folk-tale water that heals all diseases.⁵¹ Instead, he can gift Justyna a good life filled with productive work. Having confessed the feelings that Justyna sparked in him, Jan tells her about rural life in detail. He lists its advantages and, likewise, its challenges, which he poignantly articulates: "The village had two serious problems; one was that there was a lack of pastures and grazing, and the other was"⁵² that "water was bloody beyond measure."⁵³ The lack of fields and meadows spawns conflicts between neighbors, is the bone of contention between the villagers and Korczyński, and inflicts hunger on families

48 See Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, pp. 233–234.

49 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 261.

50 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 261 (italics mine).

51 On the meaning of miraculous water as related to folk-tales and the cult of Catholic saints, see Karolina Siemion, "Woda cudowna i woda zwyczajna," *Konteksty. Polska sztuka ludowa* 2002, nr 1–2, pp. 173–184.

52 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, p. 264 (italics mine).

53 Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vols. 2–3, p. 175.

with many children and meager acres. Although Justyna has already declared that she is capable of carrying water, Jan revisits this issue as if to double-check and make sure that she really understands what the life and work in the village entail. Marking the conclusion of the chapter, the end of the trip to the grave mound, when a lady from the manor house envisions reading books about faraway seas, lands, and wonders with Jan, is a harbinger of later developments: the explicit confession of love and proposal.

Emphatically and crucially, Jan Bohatyrowicz was captivated not only by Justyna's beauty and sad life story. Her zeal to work and readiness to abandon the comforts of the Korczyński estate ultimately swayed Jan by demonstrating that Justyna was not just one to be admired from a distance, but that she would make a good partner in running a household and a companion in life which, while potentially happy, will certainly be stamped by bloody sweat. There is no miraculous healing water in this life; instead, there is bloody water signifying that humans have not subordinated nature entirely and that the village of Bohatyrowicze has not abided by the spirit of the time and lags behind. It has some serious catching up to do with modernity as represented by Witold and the ideas of rural modernization that his education instilled in him. His designs are meant to mitigate the hardships of the villagers' life and to take water poles off women's shoulders, freeing them of a burden that, interestingly, appears even in Justyna's reverie about her future life with Jan:

She closed her eyes and laid her head on her arm, resting on the windowsill, and did she dream or daydream? She saw clearly before her, almost as bright as life, a farmstead rosy in the dawn light, pearled with morning dew, and a handsome young man walking across the grass. He went to the stable, opened the doors, and began to pull a ladder-sided wagon out of it. A very young, barefoot girl *with buckets on her arm ran toward the river*; an old man in a thick capote, with a radiating sheaf of wrinkles on his high forehead, opened the window of his room and raised his pale, suffering eyes toward the sky. But who was it that came out onto the porch of the house and was standing under its cornice carved in thick flourishes? It was she herself... she... in a short, checkered skirt, with her braid hanging down on a loose caftan, with a face as happy as the face of that handsome man, who turned his eyes toward her, with a sickle in his hand...⁵⁴

As readers, we never find out whether the well-digging project was indeed implemented in the village of Bohatyrowicze,⁵⁵ giving some respite to the local

54 Orzeszkowa, *On the Niemen*, pp. 302–303 (italics mine).

55 Notably, Bachórz is quite dismissive of Witold's well-digging enterprise in his critical introduction to *On the Niemen*, which he edited as a volume in the National Library series (Polish: *Biblioteka Narodowa*). Bachórz calls the idea "civilizational cosmetology," evidently failing to appreciate the effort and toil of women having to fetch water daily from the river. Bachórz believes that it is more urgent to bridge of "the burrows that separated Korczyn from Bohatyrowicze." While reconciling the manor and the village is certainly an important

women, who, though most likely still having to carry water, would no longer have to climb down and up the steep riverbank for it. What we can do instead is have a look beyond Orzeszkowa's novel and see what the drinking water supply was like in the real-life Polish countryside. Where was water hauled from and who did that? To answer these questions, I pass from 19th-century literary fiction to contemporary non-fiction in the next section.

The village and the water

In 2023, Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's historical (or, rather, her-storical) study *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [*Peasant Women: A Story of Our Grandmothers*] was published by Marginesy. The yellow book cover features a cut-out from an old photograph showing a village woman carrying a shoulder pole. Behind the woman's head and her effort-bent back, there is a white circle that brings to mind the sun and also a halo, a ring of light in pictures of the blessed and saints. In this symbolic way, the very cover of the book suggests that the toil of women's labor should be recognized and appreciated like the deeds of the beatified and the canonized. Kuciel-Frydryszak's narrative shows how hard rural life was in Poland at the turn of the 19th century, especially for girls and women. Everyday drudgery of looking after the livestock, husband, and children, multiple pregnancies and childbirths, frequent incidence of child death, poverty, violence, and impeded access to education were all typical elements of the world inhabited by many village women, which we can today confront with 19th-century literary texts where the countryside is portrayed as an arcadia. Kuciel-Frydryszak's study can be usefully read side by side with Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen*, especially with the passages about the carrying of water, as discussed in the preceding section.

The whole of the photograph used on the cover of *Chłopki* is reproduced in chapter 8. In the foreground, there is an elderly woman with a carrying pole, captured mid-step, and in the background, there are village houses. There is no knowing whether the peasant is coming back from the river or from the common well, but the caption says: "Water-carrying is one of women's major hardships. Lipnica Murowana in Little Poland, 1932."⁵⁶ Besides picturing the chore, the chapter also tells of Michalina, who carried water from the river just as the Bohatyrowicze women did:

matter, I believe that it is no less important to ease women's daily toil and to secure healthier drinking water than river water for the local population. See Józef Bachórz, "Wstęp," in Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, vol. 1, p. lxvii.

56 Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* (Warszawa: Marginesy, 2023), p. 199.

Michalina's additional misery is that there is no well. She carries water in a bucket from the river, a considerable uphill climb, through mud in autumn, through snow in winter. "When my husband had time, he'd go and fetch water; I'd also send the girls down, three at a time, for each to carry some and not get ripped up. Once in springtime, I went all through mud, so high up that you couldn't see your legs, and the mount so far away; I was eight months pregnant with my Genka then, and my neighbor, a bricklayer, took pity on me; he took that water over from me and brought it home. I still remember him for that; I asked him to be my Genka's godfather," she reminisces.⁵⁷

The passage makes it clear what a precious favor it was for the pregnant Michalina to be given a hand in water-carrying; after all, a god-parenting request was not extended just to anyone. Another thing that the excerpt implies, and that Kuciel-Frydryszak describes in more detail in her book, is that pregnant women did not enjoy any preferential treatment and had to work hard until the very childbirth.

Michalina prayed for a well, but her prayers were not heard. There was not enough money to dig deeper than seventy cubits: "can't afford to dig further, the deeper the pricier."⁵⁸

The women's duty of water-carrying is invoked throughout Kuciel-Frydryszak's book. It is a sheer impossibility to cite all the scattered passages, but one in chapter 10, I believe, deserves quoting:

[T]he youngest sister, Marianna, for whom there was no maidservant job anymore at the palace, was hired by a local teacher. "She was only fourteen and worked too hard for her age, milking the cows, cooking, tidying up, and *the worst and the most enervating thing was carrying water from the well on a shoulder pole,*" Marianna's niece recounts.⁵⁹

While Kuciel-Frydryszak herself does not use the term, we would not err much to follow Orzeszkowa and restate that the Polish countryside had some great problems, and that "bloody water" was one of those.

The narratives collected by Kuciel-Frydryszak in *Chłopki* can be fruitfully brought together with the findings reported by Karolina Siemion in her paper that caps her ethnological field research carried out in "villages in the vicinity of Krasnobród, Rzeszów, and Krosno and in Gietrzwałd from April to November 1999."⁶⁰ Siemion relates that her respondents were mainly women aged between sixty and eighty years of age. Let me quote two passages from the interviews at length:

To carry water, a hard, physical chore, was usually the duty of women—wives, daughters, maidservants—though men sometimes went to the well for water, too: "Those were hard times; there were just two wells in the village, and the folks came over with buckets. You

57 Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki*, pp. 208–209 (italics mine).

58 Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki*, p. 209.

59 Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki*, pp. 258–209 (italics mine).

60 Siemion, "Woda cudowna," p. 172.

queued in a line for an hour or two before you could fill your bucket with water.” High up there, in Antonowka, water was deep down; if you were thirsty, you got milk to drink, because water was to be had only two times a day—in the morning and in the evening. Folks would rally up, a few at a time, because you had to pump very hard. Now life is easy. You, the young, live now in a modern world, and we lived in ancient times, yes, backward. You put it over your neck and carried buckets with water; and now it’s “click” and water is running. Everybody carried water, whoever there was at home, women, and men, and little girls. There were big families of twelve, so a lot of water was needed. And in winter, when you brought some for the cows, they gulped once and you had to go again... (interview 1.13).

In the old days, water was brought from the spring, but to carry it by hand was hard [...] you couldn’t manage, so *you needed to take those carriers, as they called them, on your shoulders. And then, after the war, the four of us, goodmen, chipped in and had a pumping well made* so we didn’t have to carry it from so far away. It cost us a lot, but pumped poorly, so then everybody contributed and the whole village had a hydrophore station built at its own expense, and since then we’ve had water at home. (interview 1.9)⁶¹

Noteworthy in these two interviews is the fact that water-carrying, a vital chore, is mentioned as onerous, physically exhausting, and demanding considerable engagement from entire families. In the former passage, the respondent recollects queuing to the well and pumping water by hand, and in the latter, the interviewee talks of fetching water from a spring. It was only after the war that the villagers in this passage collectively paid for a well, and then for a hydrophore station, to have water available at home. In both interviews, there is a reference to a carrying pole, though it is called “carriers” in the latter. Symptomatically, the respondent in the former interview twice repeats that “now” (i. e., at the end of the 20th century, when the interviews were conducted) life is easier because one “click” is enough for water to run.

The testimonies compiled by Kuciel-Frydryszak and Siemion show that the problem of water supply for the rural populations was not solved by 19th-century reformers such as Witold Korczyński in Orzeszkowa’s novel. In all probability, it has not been fully solved till this day, though the general situation is obviously much better than it was in the 19th and 20th centuries. The literature on technical aspects of water supply for villages and the political factors in constructing water mains in rural areas indicates that, while the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic launched policies for connecting farms to the water supply system, the process stumbled on many obstacles and was time-consuming.⁶² In fact, it has

61 Siemion, “Woda cudowna,” p. 172.

62 See Czesław Grabarczyk and Adam Szpindor, “Zaopatrzenie wsi w wodę. Przegląd zagadnień, ocena stanu aktualnego oraz kierunki i warunki osiągnięcia postępu naukowo-technicznego,” *Postępy Nauk Rolniczych* 1989, nr 2. The paper relates that the first law on water supply for agriculture and villages was passed in 1965 and that, at the time of writing the paper, only 30% of individual farms used a mechanized water supply system, that is, waterpipes.

not been completed yet. A paper from 2013 states that, “regarding the water supply system, 70% of households are connected to water mains, but only 20% to the sewage system”⁶³ in rural areas. The Statistics Poland (Polish: *Główny Urząd Statystyczny*) report titled *Obszary wiejskie w Polsce w 2020 roku* [*The Rural Areas in Poland in 2020*] found that even if the connecting of households to the water supply system had considerably advanced, not all the inhabitants were able use that infrastructure: “In 2020, in rural areas, 92.5% (4.5 million) households had a waterpipe (an increase of 0.9 p.p. compared to 2010); 87.0% (4.2 million) had a toilet (an increase of 1.7 p.p.); and 83.5% (4.1 million) had a bathroom (an increase of 2.1 p.p.)”⁶⁴

Importantly, in the 1990s, when Siemion did her fieldwork, “the hauling and carrying of water from the well was still [...] a significant—and in Mazovia, Podlachia, Little Poland, and the Lublin region, a predominant—method of water supply in rural households.”⁶⁵ The reality in villages differed from the “click-and-water-is-running” image conjured by Siemion’s respondent. In many places of Poland, villagers still had to carry water from the well at the end of the 20th century; it was not provided by the water supply system. Things were made somewhat easier for some farms because, even if not connected to the water mains, they could use private wells and electric pumps, which made water available from tap at home, without having to hoist it up from the well in a bucket. Nevertheless, the “bloody water” problem was still very much around in Poland in the 20th century, and young people today may have an idea of it from family stories, if not from any other source.

Tap water

Passing to water which is available from the tap “at a click,” we can compare water worry as experienced by the Bohatyrowicze population in the late 1880s, by pre- and post-war village women, and by ourselves today. It barely occurs to city dwellers to think on what a long and complicated road their drinking water daily takes to get to them. One turns the tap, and water is there, both cold and hot, to

63 Jan Sikora, “Proces humanizowania warunków pracy i życia mieszkańców polskiej wsi,” *Humanizacja pracy. Kondycja współczesnej humanizacji pracy. Ciągłość czy zmiana?* 2013, nr 3, p. 162.

64 Główny Urząd Statystyczny. *Obszary wiejskie w Polsce w 2020 roku* (Warszawa and Olsztyn: Główny Urząd Statystyczny and Urząd Statystyczny w Olsztynie, 2022), p. 76, https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5507/2/5/1/obszary_wiejskie_w_polsce_w_2020_r_pl.pdf [access 27.09.23].

65 Ryszard Gładysz, “Wodociąg jako istotny element infrastruktury technicznej wsi,” *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Oeconomica* 1997, nr 143, p. 126.

boot. Poland's water situation is described competently and intelligibly by Mencwel in his non-fiction book *Hydrozagadka*. At the beginning of his story, Mencwel observes:

It seems that water is a simple substance that just works and is easy to operate. We assume this because we have broken away from its natural cycle. Water has become a liquid of everyday use that runs from the tap. A common, obvious, and transparent substance. We have channelized it and almost turned it into a product of civilization. Not so long ago, "hot running water" was a political slogan meaning, more or less, that voters did not need anything extraordinary. As if water were something ordinary.⁶⁶

In Mencwel's view water has become objectified and civilized and has come to be regarded as a civilization achievement rather than as a natural resource which must be taken care of if we are to enjoy it, if we are to continue to have it on turning the tap. Mencwel goes on to explain that:

[T]he water which we can use comes first of all [...] from rivers, lakes, and aquifers. For example, in Poland, we take seventy percent of water from underground resources and thirty percent from surface waters. The pace at which these resources are replenished depends on the weather conditions on the Earth. It may seem to us that we owe tap water or bottled water exclusively to the products of civilization—pipes, filters, and water mains—but, in fact, we still depend on the powerful natural machinery that is the water cycle. Are any of us aware of that on a daily basis?⁶⁷

It is from a river—the Vistula—that most of the water used by the Warsaw residents is obtained (the figure Mencwel cites is about seventy percent). Yes, that's correct: it is the 21st century, and we still haul our drinking water from the river, though it is of course transported by means of new technologies rather than in buckets. Half in jest, half in earnest, the traditional link between women and water-carrying is upheld in this context, too, as Warsaw's water intake station on the Vistula is called Chubby Kate (Polish: *Gruba Kaśka*).

We should make no mistake, though; Mencwel does not poke fun either at this name or at the water situation in Poland. He speaks loud and clear as a reporter who is likely to be heard by a large audience, reaffirming what researchers have known and said for a long time: Poland is a water-poor country.⁶⁸ Mencwel

66 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, pp. 17–18.

67 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, p. 25.

68 "With its resource index of 1460 m³/year, since 1990, Poland has been classified in the World Water Council Report as a country with a water deficit comparable, for example, to Egypt." Wojciech Kuczyński and Waldemar Żuchowicki, "Ocena aktualnej sytuacji w zaopatrzeniu w wodę w Polsce na tle sytuacji w świecie," *Rocznik Ochrony Środowiska* 2010, nr 12, p. 422. "Poland is among water-poor countries. This is caused both by relatively small precipitation and the location in a drainage divide. This is expressed in a low river outflow index in Poland, which is far lower than for neighbor rivers. In terms of the annual amount of water per one inhabitant, our quantity of about 1700 dm³ puts Poland in one of the last places in Europe. In

sounds an alarm: “It is now, in the third decade of the 21st century, that the fate of water in Poland is being decided. It is today that we must launch actions that will help us cope with a future crisis.”⁶⁹ Mencwel also warns that: “The fundamental problem is that water management in Poland has ground to a halt and lost touch with the changing climate situation.”⁷⁰

These observations neatly tie in with the theme of “bloody water” in *On the Niemen*, though Mencwel does not prophesy that we will have to carry water in buckets from the river again. Instead, he warns that: “Water shortages are becoming part of our daily experience [...]. We may not realize that, but the water in our taps is often taken on credit.”⁷¹ Surely water taken on credit or water that will be scarce in the future will become “bloody” in the sense that to supply it in quantities to which have become accustomed will be far more difficult than it is now? Mencwel’s view is cautiously optimistic, and he cites examples of interventions that will help us tend to water resources. On typing “wojna o wodę” (“war for water”) into Internet browsers, we will see a series of disturbing headings, such as: *Skąd się biorą wojny o wodę?* (What causes wars for water?), *Czy czekają nas wojny o wodę?* (Are wars for water looming?), *Perzyński: będzie coraz więcej wojen o wodę* (Perzyński: there will be more and more wars for water), *Wojna o wodę. Żyjemy w epoce “wielkiego osuszania”* (War for water: We live in the age of “great drying”), and *Kiedy wojna o wodę?* (A war for water: When?). These were the first Google hits on 26th September 2023.

Regrettably, “water wars” is not only a catchy phrase coined as a clickbait. Already in 2018, Paweł Borek observed: “Today, one can very easily identify regions in the world where access to drinking water is becoming a socio-political problem, which often leads to conflict and tension.”⁷² Borek wrote about African, Middle-Eastern, and Asian countries, but, arguably, even if Europe does not literally go to war over water, it will face, nay, it is already facing, water stress and, given this, we are now fighting a war to preserve water resources for ourselves and the future generations. So far, this has been a bloodless struggle, at least regarding people, though climate change, increased temperature, and human activities have prompted alterations in ecosystems, including in the surroundings of rivers. Some animal species are disappearing, as are some vegetal species. In waging a

the last fifteen years, this figure was usually lower than the average, mainly as a result of droughts, which have afflicted Poland, except short intervals, since 1982.” Gładysz, “Wodociąg,” p. 117.

69 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, p. 15.

70 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, p. 17.

71 Mencwel, *Hydrozagadka*, p. 249.

72 Paweł Borek, “Woda jako przyczyna konfliktów zbrojnych w XXI wieku,” *Rozprawy Społeczne* 2018, nr 2, p. 33.

fight against nature (and for reasons quite unclear, too), humans are, so to speak, digging their own grave. This must stop, for humans' own good.

Why do we need lessons on water?

We should turn to face the river, for ourselves and for the following generations. We need to acknowledge that we must care about rivers if we want to survive, and we must educate young people about this necessity. The school offers us a range of opportunities in this respect. Water can be talked about in geography, biology, and history classrooms; it can also be addressed in Polish classrooms when mandatory school readings, such as *On the Niemen*, are discussed. Lessons about the bloody water of the Niemen can be converted into lessons on ecology, inviting students to reflect on our culture, civilization, climate change, and water pollution. I believe that such classroom work will nurture caring attitudes to the environment in young people. Students and teachers themselves tend to complain that Orzeszkowa's novel is boring, not least because of its elaborate depictions of nature. Meanwhile, this is precisely what we should fathom with particular attention today, in the 21st century. "Old" books with their descriptions of the natural world can offer us a helpful starting point for talking about what nature is for us now and what is its relevance to people in our times.

By bringing together passages of Orzeszkowa's *On the Niemen*, Mencwel's *Hydrozagadka*, and Kuciel-Frydryszak's *Chłopki* we can realize that obtaining water is a timeless problem. Technologies of water supply for rural and urban households may have changed and we no longer carry water in buckets from the river or a well, but we are pervasively haunted by the looming threat of tap water becoming bloody again. Witold Korczyński, who campaigned to persuade peasants to dig wells in *On the Niemen*, can today be recognized in an educator, a writer, a reporter, or an activist who advocates for our waters, explaining why and how we should protect them.

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Abstract

In the epilogue to his book *Hydrozagadka. Kto zabiera polską wodę i jak ją odzyskać* [A *Hydro-mystery: Who Takes away Polish Water and How to Reclaim It*], Jan Mencwel calls for “living face-to-face with the river.” Turning to face the river may mean admiring it, spending one’s leisure time on the river, or becoming involved as an environmental activist or an artist who works with the river. Recognizing the challenging issue of Polish waters, including rivers, which is of utter relevance to today’s and future generations, I propose turning towards the river in Polish instruction as well. I understand this turn as part of the

“turn to the Earth” as discussed by Magdalena Ochwat in “(Współ)myślenie w humanistyce. Literackie ekokształcenie w epoce antropocenu” [“(Co-)Thinking in the Humanities: Literary Eco-education in the Anthropocene”]. In this paper, I focus on selected passages from Eliza Orzeszkowa’s novel *On the Niemen* (1888) which show the Niemen as a source of drinking water for the inhabitants of the Bohatyrowicze village. Further, I bring together these depictions of obtaining water for households and excerpts from contemporary Polish non-fiction: Mencwel’s *Hydrozagadka* (2023) and Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak’s *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [*Peasant Women: A Story of Our Grandmothers*] (2023). My aim in doing so is to re-interpret Orzeszkowa’s classic in the spirit of the eco-humanities and offer teachers new ideas of discussing the “old” novel, which is part of the core curriculum.

Keywords: Eliza Orzeszkowa, the Niemen, river, drinking water, eco-humanities, Polish, Polish education.

“Legendary” Water: The Imagery of the *Sea* in Textbook Passages from Folktales, Legends, and Myths¹

Introduction: The linguistic picture of *water* in language and culture

Colorless, odorless, and yet priceless. Water is the only substance that appears in all the three states of matter in nature: as a commonly known liquid, a solid (ice, snow, and hail), and a gas (water vapor/steam). Water is the source of life; there are no living organisms on the Earth capable of functioning without water. It is indispensable for breathing and for regulating body and air temperature. The list of its beneficial properties is practically endless.

Despite that, water can be appreciated and interpreted in various ways, like the entire reality that people inhabit. The perception of the natural environment differs from interpreter to interpreter, with their respective visions of the objects they apprehend premised on their knowledge, experiences, and also emotional judgments and imaginations concerning the entities they see. To specify, these imaginations are intrinsically human and are generated from the human point of view.

Dictionaries of the Polish language primarily list characteristic features of water, such as odorlessness, colorlessness, and translucence. *Inny słownik języka polskiego* [A Different Polish Dictionary] defines *water* (*woda*) as “a transparent fluid, in a liquid state, without flavor or smell, filling seas and rivers, and falling down on earth as rain”²; and *Słownik języka Jana Chryzostoma Paska* [A Dictionary of Jan Chryzostom Pasek’s Language], which draws on Early Modern Polish, defines it as “the most common liquid in nature, situated in hollows of the

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2 Mirosław Bańko, ed., *Inny słownik języka polskiego* PWN, vol. 2 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000), p. 1139.

earth's crust, falling down as rain" and also as "a river, a pond, a sea."³ *Wielki słownik języka polskiego PAN* [*The Polish Academy of Sciences' Great Polish Dictionary*] encompasses four meanings of *woda* denoting a liquid ("a transparent, colorless liquid fundamental to life for people, animals, and plants"), a reservoir ("a natural or artificial aggregation of water—liquid—in nature"), a bottled beverage ("a portion of water in a bottle or another receptacle, industrially produced and sold"), and a fluid in the body ("col., liquid accumulating in bodily cavities as a result of disease processes"). It also provides a definition of after-shave water as "a liquid being a water-solution of alcohol with ingredients of various origins, used by humans for cosmetic purposes" and of flooding water ("a flood as a force destroying people's possessions").⁴ None of the dictionary definitions takes note of the immense role of big water reservoirs, seas, and oceans and of their relevance to life on the Earth through the production of oxygen and the regulation of the climate.⁵

Colloquial Polish derivatives perpetuate the features of water as seen from the human perspective, for example the lack of color (e. g., in the expression *wodniste oczy*; literally: waterish eyes, meaning pallid eyes) and the lack of substance/content (e. g., in the lexemes *rozwadniać* and *wodnisty*; literally: water down and watery, meaning dilute and thin). Interestingly, the denotations of the words defining water speak to the human belief that water is plentiful, as communicated in "water fills" reservoirs ("to fill—to make something full; to appear somewhere in a big quantity, taking up all the room available"⁶). Water is also "the most common liquid," that is, one widespread, trivial, and unimportant. For their part, the colloquial usages suggest that water is undervalued because they underscore its insubstantiality and non-concreteness.

Nevertheless, water is an interesting object as one of the elements—basic components of the world—which is contrasted with fire and earth. According to the folk stereotypes and the oldest myth, it was from water that the world emerged, and it is on water that the Earth rests. Water is both a beneficial and a destructive force; it can sustain life, cleanse, and sanctify, but it can also drown and transport evil forces. Its elemental properties are employed in an array of

3 Witold Doroszewski and Halina Konieczna, eds., *Słownik języka Jana Chryzostoma Paska* (Wrocław, Warszawa, and Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1978), p. 212.

4 *Wielki słownik języka polskiego PAN*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/8016/woda#przyslowia> [accessed 25.02.2024].

5 Notably, we owe every second breath we take to the oceans, which produce as much as half of the oxygen in the atmosphere. The seas and oceans store 50 times as much carbon dioxide as the atmosphere and absorb up to 30% of its annual anthropogenic emissions. See WWF, "Światowy dzień oceanów. 8 czerwca," June 8, 2019, <https://www.wwf.pl/aktualnosci/swiatio-wy-dzien-oceanow> [accessed 28.02.2024].

6 Witold Doroszewski, ed., *Słownik języka polskiego*, entry: "wypełniać," <https://doroszewski.pwn.pl/haslo/wypelniac> [accessed 28.02.2024].

magic and healing practices. Water is venerated as an object of worship. Clean water is a symbol of life, fertility, and purity, while turbid water can be the cesspool of evil powers, the devil, and demons. Since the beginning of humankind, water has been regarded as a life-giving element that nurtures all the creatures on the Earth.

Christianity associates water with baptism-effected purification, following in the footsteps of the ancients, who used water in purification ceremonies because it washed off dirt and sins. However, water is also *the deep* and *the abyss*, symbolizing the dark and amorphous chaos, which was given form by the Spirit of God. Water is thus a symbol of chaos, inconstancy, mutability, transformation, boundless possibilities, dissolution, healing, life source, the regeneration of mind and body, resurrection, fecundity, danger, death, purification, and baptism.⁷

Water behaves like a living being; it is in perpetual motion. It moves: *flows*, *whirls*, *bobs*, and *rocks*; it produces sounds: *roars*, *hums*, *howls*, and *swooshes*; it glistens: *sparkles*.⁸ As a symbol of life and fertility, water is most frequently represented as a *lake*, the *sea*, or *rain*. As an element, water spreads across all spheres of the world, crisscrossing the Earth, for example, through streams and rivers. It is used on a daily basis for drinking, washing, bathing, laundry, and cooking. It is fundamental to the farming of plants and animals.

Toward the imagery of *water* in education: The functions and meanings of water in the *Jutro pójdę w świat* textbook series

This is what the “human” interpretation of *water* is like in language and in culture. Yet, before an individual “grows into” the knowledge rendered in this way in language, sundry “interpreters” disseminate their visions, relying on language to inculcate them in those less experienced and less knowledgeable. Thus-shaped messages are transmitted by school textbooks, among other conduits. Polish language textbooks boast an added value since they abound with literary texts, as a result of which some students read at least some of them not only out of duty. Consequently, the content and images the textbooks spread are perpetuated in children’s minds much stronger than issues that only serve the needs of the school. For this reason, Polish language and literature textbooks are

7 Władysław Kopaliński, ed., *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), p. 1298.

8 Jerzy Bartmiński, ed., *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych*, vol. 1. *Kosmos*, part 2. *Ziemia, woda, podziemie* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marie Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1999), p. 161.

an important factor in knowledge and emotions related to ecological awareness⁹ and pivotal to environmental education.

My account and examination of the *water* images in “mediated” messages are based on an in-depth study of *Jutro pójdę w świat* [*Tomorrow I'll Set out into the World*], a Polish textbook series for primary schools authored by Hanna and Urszula Dobrowolski and published by Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne (WSiP; the Scholastic and Educational Press).¹⁰ My research sought to establish what images of *water* the series produced, particularly regarding water in certain aggregations and reservoirs, such as rivers, ponds, lakes, and the sea. These water bodies make up the natural environment of humans—their near world,¹¹ which calls for care today and demands that we truly comprehend the environmental and cultural facets of the ecological crisis. It is exigent that we begin to revise our perception of the key role of certain actors/hydrological objects. Given this, it is more than warranted to have a closer look at how humans’ relations with water are defined, what features are attributed to them and, consequently what images of water are presented to child readers and students. What kind of relationship to water is propagated by the images the authors construct in the textbook series?

A general survey of texts containing aquatic motifs and water-related vocabulary in the series indicates that, across the textbooks, there are 95 water-themed passages¹² in which water is represented in multiple iterations and forms, such as the sea, the ocean, a river, a brook, a stream, a wellspring, a lake, a pond, a pool, a swamp, and a swimming pool, and also in various states of matter, such as water, snow, ice (icebergs), and fog. Water has several functions and meanings in the textbooks:

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- 9 **Ecological awareness** (with “ecology” derived from Greek *oikos*: home, dwelling place, milieu, and *logos*: discourse/knowledge) is a notion based on ecological knowledge and conscious actions of people/societies vis-à-vis environmental demands. Key to ecological awareness is an understanding of the mechanisms of nature and a sound assessment of the limits to the human uses of nature and constraints we must observe. Equally important to ecological awareness is environmental sensitivity and attitude to the environment. See Jan Frątczak, *Świadomość ekologiczna dzieci, młodzieży i dorosłych w aspekcie edukacji szkolnej i nieszkolnej* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo WSP w Bydgoszczy, 2001), pp. 32–34.
- 10 Hanna Dobrowolska and Urszula Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 4* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 2017); Hanna Dobrowolska and Urszula Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 5* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 2018); Hanna Dobrowolska and Urszula Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 6* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 2019).
- 11 Jerzy Bartmiński, “Rzeka w językowo-kulturowym obrazie świata Polaków,” in *Urzeczenie. Locje literatury i wyobraźni*, eds. Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), p. 60.
- 12 The total of 1,020 pages of the three *Jutro pójdę w świat* textbooks only contain 95 water motifs in longer excerpts (e.g., short texts) and short mentions (e.g., in exercises that include lexemes related to the sematic field of *water* in literal or symbolic contexts).

- in the realistic sense, water as a reservoir is a component of space when water motifs and elements are included in a landscape or a cityscape as a background to or a setting of “human” events. On such occasions, they tend to be an aesthetic place of relaxation and leisure or a site of sporting exploits (e. g., in an excerpt from *Ronja, córka zbójnika* [*Ronia, the Robber’s Daughter*]: “being in her forest, by a small lake which, bathed in the sun, shone with a warm, golden glimmer”¹³; in the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz*: “Long years ago, there stood among such fields, upon the bank of a brook,/[...]/, A nobleman’s manor house ...”¹⁴; and in the biblical Book of Psalms: “[the Lord] leads me beside waters, where I can rest; he restores my soul”¹⁵; – in the realistic sense (with the name of the reservoir supposed to corroborate the truthfulness of the story), in fantastic texts (folktales, legends, and myths) and in historical narratives, water (first and foremost rivers, but also lake shores and sea coasts) is a site anchoring the establishment/foundation of state, urban, and other communities. For example: “such were the real beginnings of Warsaw, our capital. [...] by the ‘white water’ of the Vistula, Wars the fisherman built a hut of pine logs and covered it with reed for a roof.”¹⁶ Water is similarly referenced in the *Kroniki* [*Chronicles*] by Janko of Czarnków¹⁷ and in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Krzyżacy* [*The Knights of the Cross*]¹⁸;
- in the realistic sense (as a liquid), sharing water as a source of life with another person is a measure of the quality of human relations. This is exemplified in Anatol Stern’s short story “O tym, co jest najpiękniejsze na świecie” [“On the Most Beautiful Thing in the World”],¹⁹ where a tale of two soldiers in a liminal

13 Astrid Lindgren, “Ronja, córka zbójnika,” an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 285. Given that this article analyses the ways in which the imagery of water/sea is used in the Polish versions/translations cited in the textbooks, the quotations are given here and below in a direct, word-for-word translation from Polish into English (by the translator of this paper), rather than in the wording proposed in the published English-language editions of the source-texts. For an English translation of Lindgren’s novel, see, e. g., Astrid Lindgren, *Ronia, the Robber’s Daughter*, trans. Patricia Crampton (New York: Puffin Books, 1985).

14 Adam Mickiewicz, “Pan Tadeusz,” an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 5, p. 85. For an English translation, see, e. g., Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz: The Last Foray in Lithuania*, trans. Bill Johnston (New York: Archipelago Books, 2018).

15 Old Testament, Book of Psalms, an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 5, p. 210.

16 Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, “Warszawa, stolica Polski,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 191.

17 Janko z Czarnkowa, “Kroniki,” excerpts, trans. Józef Żerbiłło, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 126.

18 Henryk Sienkiewicz, “Krzyżacy,” an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, pp. 128–133.

19 Anatol Stern, “O tym, co jest najpiękniejsze na świecie,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 287.

situation who secretly give up their scarce water supply to each other out of great friendship is told from an animal perspective:

They had a little water, but I gathered from their conversation that it would only sustain one man for a few days. And when the healthy one gave water to the wounded one, he would only pretend to drink to preserve it for his companion²⁰;

- in the realistic sense (as a liquid), water is also shown as a cleaning agent (as in a passage from Anna Onichimowska’s novel *Krzysztofa Pączka droga do sławy* [*Chris Donought’s Path to Fame*]: “I darted out of the bathroom, grabbed the brat, threw her into the bathtub, though she fought and squealed, and turned the water on. Because she wouldn’t wash her hands”²¹);
- in the realistic sense (as a reservoir), water is mentioned in technical terms on one occasion, when humans begin to command it (in the teacher materials concerning Polish discoverers and inventors, such as in “Ignacy Prądzyński (1792–1850)—a general, designed the 100-kilometer-long Augustów Canal, complete with a system of 18 sluices, water-impounding weirs, and many bridges”; “1824 – the design of the Augustów Canal, a modern waterway, and the commencement of its construction.”²²);
- in a symbolic sense, water (as a reservoir) also appears in a as a cultureme²³ that demarcates state territories and borders, and the boundaries of regions; a sign of Polish patriotism. This role is first and foremost ascribed to rivers and the sea, which are furnished with proper names (e.g., the Vistula, the Warta, and the Baltic²⁴ in Józef Wybicki’s “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego” [“The Dąbrowski Mazurka”]²⁵);

20 Stern, “O tym, co jest najpiękniejsze,” p. 285.

21 Anna Onichimowska, “Krzysztofa Pączka droga do sławy,” an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 282.

22 “Polscy odkrywcy i wynalazcy,” teacher material, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 154–155.

23 Culturemes are defined as “key words relevant to the self-identification of a community and conveying both its attitude to tradition and inherited values and the way it handles the present moment and experiences the world as it is now.” See Hanna Burkhardt, Marek Łaziński, and Alicja Nagórko, *Dystynktywny słownik synonimów* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), p. 19.

24 Józef Wybicki, “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 98. (“Mazurek Dąbrowskiego” is the national anthem of Poland; translator’s note.)

25 Culturemes “comprise national symbols (e.g., *gościnność*/hospitality, *ojczyzna*/fatherland, *szlachta*/nobility, and *ziemiaństwo*/landed gentry), national topography (e.g., *Polska*/Poland, *Częstochowa*, *Katyni*, *Kresy*/Borderlands, *Sybir*/Siberia, *Wawel*, *Westerplatte*, and *Wisła*/Vistula), endoethnonyms (*Polak*/male Pole and *Polka*/female Pole), value terms (e.g., *Bóg*/God, *Jezus*/Jesus, *Matka Boża*/Mother of God, *honor*, *pracowitość*/industriousness, *wolność*/freedom), ideas [...], and markers of cultural identity [...].” Maciej Rak, “Co to jest kulturem?” *LingVaria* 2015, nr 2 (20), p. 313.

- water in the magical, creational sense (as a liquid) is a sacred fluid capable of transfiguring/creating reality, for example, when used in the first-haircut ritual (*postrzyżyny*) or baptism to accomplish transformation (of a child into an adult or a pagan into a Christian), such as in a passage from Cecylia Niewiadomska’s legend “Piaśt”: “Piaśt lifted him up, embraced him, sprinkled him with spring water, and [...] trimmed his hair over the forehead,”²⁶ and in “Pani Twardowska” by Adam Mickiewicz²⁷).

As creational, but controlled by God’s will, water is also an essential part in the creation of the world in an excerpt from Anna Kamińska’s *Książka nad książkami* [*The Book of Books*]²⁸ and in “Narodziny świata” [“The Birth of the World”] in Jan Paradowski’s *Mitologia* [*Mythology*]: “Springs found their caves, and lakes comfortable dales for themselves.”²⁹ It is only in the latter image (in a myth) that water is shown as an autonomous being relevant to **itself and the world**.

This brief qualitative (semantic) analysis neither conveys the distribution or proportions of the aquatic images in the textbooks nor indicates what vision of water prevails in the message young users obtain from them. Meanwhile, the quality of this message may affect the perception and understanding of the world, the modes of value-judging people, phenomena, and things espoused by language users, and even their responses and behavior. The construction of the image of the world largely depends on the human perspective and also on the conventions/sets of rules embodied in various genres. Examining the presence of the water element in the textbooks, we can note that it appears in 63 excerpts from literary texts, whereof almost a half (29 passages or smaller units) stem from three genres: magic tale, legend (including biblical legend), and myth.³⁰ These are genres of oral tradition that rely on the language of symbols and are replete with the fantastic. Water often appears in them as a symbol rooted in popular, folk, and mythical manners of thought. These symbolic meanings, coupled with notions and beliefs regarding the most important objects surrounding human beings, produce the linguistic picture of the world, as

26 Cecylia Niewiadomska, “Piaśt,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 182.

27 Adam Mickiewicz, “Pani Twardowska,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 206.

28 Anna Kamińska, “Książka nad książkami,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 5, p. 191.

29 Jan Paradowski, “Mitologia,” an excerpt, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 5, p. 138.

30 In 32 out of the 95 cases, the water motif was included in exercises and teaching commentaries.

a popular interpretation of reality from the perspective of an average language user [that] reflects their mentality and corresponds to their viewpoint and their needs. It is naive [...], which means anthropocentric and ethnocentric at the same time, evidently produced from the human point of view and measured by human criteria.³¹

By analyzing the language data of the linguistic picture of the world, we can obtain an insight into human perceptions and conceptualizations of the world, also capturing human relations and attitudes to the environment when humans were yet close to nature. This concerns water as well, in particular the water objects/bodies evoked in the passages from the genres listed above. The most frequently represented ones include: *the sea* (in 18 texts or exercises), *a (small) lake* (in 11 passages), *a river* (in 10 texts), with the Vistula often appearing as a cultureme (in 9 passages), and *a (small) wellspring* (in 4 texts). Water precipitation is featured as *rain* in 6 excerpts (including once as *ślota*/wet weather).³² Below, I look into the ways the literary passages of oral literature in the textbooks construct the image of the *sea*, a water object which is often a vehicle for symbolic meaning in culture.

The imagery of the sea in literary excerpts in the *Jutro pójdę w świat* textbook series

Given that the image of *the sea* appears in the most texts, it deserves special attention. As a reservoir, the sea is perceived as a vast open space paired with the sky. In the Polish language, the very term *morze/the sea* is cognate with *moras* meaning “mud,” *morzula/morzulica*—“swamp, bog,” *morzińc*—“a huge puddle from precipitation or flooding,” and the proper names of many lakes and rivers (e. g., *Morznicza*, *Morno*, *Moraq*, and the *Morawa* River). These words are etymologically derived from the Proto-Indo-European stem *mor- || *mar-, which originally meant “a swamp,” then “a lake,” and subsequently also “the sea” (sometimes “a big river” as well).³³ The image of *morze/the sea* inscribed in the derivatives of the lexeme is that of the habitat of plants (*morszcz/kelp*, *morszczyzn/fucus*, and *morszczyzna/seaweed*), animals (*morszczak/herring gull*, *morświn/porpoise*, and *morszczuk/hake*), and fantastic creatures; a place where objects and people are submerged; and an area where people work and in whose vicinity

31 Jerzy Bartmiński, “O pojęciu językowego obrazu świata,” in Jerzy Bartmiński, *Językowe podstawy obrazu świata* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2006), p. 14.

32 These numbers do not add up to the 29 occurrences cited above since one passage/text may include two or more representations of the water element.

33 See Bartmiński, *Słownik*, p. 382.

they live (e.g., *morzanie* – “seapeople,” that is, fishermen).³⁴ Sea and land come together as two mutually complementary parts of the world, and in the tripartite model of the world, consisting of sky, earth, and sea, the latter two are its fundamental components. The choppy sea is associated with storms, winds, and typhoons.³⁵ The color of the sea water is typically depicted as greenish-blue and green, but also as bluish, blue, navy blue, gray, steel, and black. The sea tastes salty because, as a fable has it, there is a magic grinder producing salt at its bottom, or, as a legend says, a giant sheds tears into its water.³⁶

Essentially, the sea is utterly vast, unfathomable, and immeasurable, with its immensity often rendered via the *drop vs. sea* opposition.³⁷ In the linguistic picture of the world, the sea moves, emits characteristic noises, and gradually calms after the storm. It is recognized as a living creature.

In the textbook series, the sea appears for the first time in the volume for fourth-graders in an assignment that elicits a “snapshot” of the sea from students’ imagination or holiday memories:

7. Prepare a story about your favorite holiday souvenir for the opening of the exhibition. You can speak on behalf of this souvenir, for example: “I am a small, pinkish seashell. I’ve always liked floating on the waves and diving...”³⁸

Water—the sea (or rather the seashore)—is viewed here as a real place (made additionally tangible by the accompanying photos of children on the beach and also seashells) that triggers positive connotations connected to having a good time, pleasant weather, and leisure.

Meanwhile, the oldest cultures regard the sea and the ocean as primordial matter from which the earth and the entire world emerged, though until the cosmos was created and space orderly arranged, the marine element itself had embodied ultimate chaos. The image of the world/the sea coming into being as already ordered and controlled by God is offered to young readers in the fifth-grade textbook, citing a passage from *Książka nad książkami*:

On the second day, God created the vault of the sky to divide the water of the earth from the water of heavens.

On the third day, God ordered the waters to come down together into one. Thus the Sea came into being. Dry land emerged. God called it the Earth. He saw that all this was good.³⁹

34 Bartmiński, *Słownik*, p. 382.

35 Bartmiński, *Słownik*, p. 383.

36 Bartmiński, *Słownik*, p. 386.

37 Jolanta Maćkiewicz, “Metafora a językowy obraz świata (na przykładzie metaforyki morskiej),” *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* 1990, nr 3, pp. 49–58.

38 Assignment 7, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 15.

39 Kamińska, “Książka,” p. 191.

The text portrays the sea as a vast reservoir that combines all the waters (which flow from all places down to one spot) and, importantly, is assessed as good. It is set apart from the earth on the basis of the *dry* vs. *wet* opposition. Readers find out that before that, water and heavens formed one whole and that the sea was brought forth by God's will and is ruled by God. It is to God that it sings, praising him.⁴⁰

The account of *The Odyssey*⁴¹ and the myth of Dedalus and Icarus⁴² portray the sea as sinister, vast, and ridden with dangers and traps, being also difficult to traverse. In the account of *The Odyssey*, the sea is pictured as an immense expanse where the protagonist wanders unable to return to his home island, as vengeful Poseidon, the god of seas and oceans, doomed him to roam endlessly amid marine space. According to the ancient Greeks, the pelagic depths were inhabited by a host of deities (with Poseidon, or Neptune in Roman mythology, among them), and the sea, being the son of the Sky (Uranus) and the Earth (Gaia), was the forebear of gods and titans. There are more mythical creatures in the "textbook" sea, which is also populated by sirens described as "sea nymphs living on a Mediterranean island," whose "enchanted singing lured the sailors sailing by into the coastal rocks."⁴³ The sirens would have tempted Odysseus into perdition too, had it not been for his shrewdness when navigating past their island.

The sea is a place where Odysseus loses his bearings and experiences loneliness. In the myth of Dedalus and Icarus, it is also a dividing space, called "the far sea," which means, as explained by one dictionary entry, "stretching over a large distance; reaching far, extensive; long, long-lasting."⁴⁴ It is an unknown space that must be crossed to find one's way to one's homeland. The myth pictures the marine element as indifferent, but actively responding to the fall of Icarus by engulfing him and becoming his grave: "The green sea waves engulfed him for ever."⁴⁵ Since then, the sea itself "has been called [...] the Icarian Sea from the name of Dedalus' son."

40 The sea "sings" to God in Franciszek Karpiński, "Pieśń poranna" ["A Morning Song"], in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 197.

41 "Czy wiesz, że...", teacher material," in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 79.

42 Wanda Markowska, "Dedal i Ikar," in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, pp. 80–82.

43 "Legendarne potwory," teacher material," in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 212.

44 This is sub-entry 3 in over 10 dictionary sub-entries of the adjective "daleki/far." The first sub-entry speaks of a remote location (e.g., faraway countries), and the second of arriving from a large distance (e.g., a guests from far away). See Mieczysław Szymczak, ed., *Słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: PWN, 1978), pp. 357–358.

45 Markowska, "Dedal i Ikar," p. 82.

The teacher material and the exercises referencing the “mythical” sea render it in far more common terms, as concretizing the setting peopled by the mythical protagonists (to live “by the Icarian Sea”) and being a source of food (“catching fish on the seashore”).⁴⁶ This somewhat domesticates the “mythical” vision of a mysterious, menacing, and awe-inspiring sea populated by deities and gods.

The literary nuggets of the textbook series also mobilize the “fable/folktale” image of the sea. It appears in two tales where water is featured as one of the elements of the world around us. One of the images is drawn by Adam Asnyk’s succinct symbolic verses which fashion an image of an expanse to be traversed on one’s way to the “magic rainbow fairy-tale,” full of wonders and spells, and hoisting one “**up above** the crimson seas.”⁴⁷ If the sea is considered a symbol of the unknown, the mysterious, the infinite, the distant (as in the fabular formulaic expression “*za siódme morze*/across the seventh sea,” meaning very far off), and the adventure-filled, “the crimson sea” suggests an unimaginable remoteness of the land of fantasy, with a stretch of one’s journey to it possibly spanned by flying “above” (like Icarus?), owing to the fairy-tale. It is no coincidence that the color of that sea is crimson/red because it symbolizes magic forces in folk texts, and indeed there are fantastic (albeit sometimes terrifying) beings across the *red sea*,⁴⁸ as exemplified by “the faraway world of wonders” and “the land of giants, specters, and magic” in Asnyk’s poem.⁴⁹

The other folktale image of the *sea* is “sketched” for young readers in “The Tale of A Fisherman and a Golden Fish,” written by Alexander Pushkin in 1833, but already known before from the Grimm Brothers’ folktale collection of 1812.⁵⁰ If the tale has a golden fish caught by a fisherman as its aquatic protagonist, the fish is linked to the sea as its native environment and, as such, can be considered to represent the marine element. The fish is prepared to fulfill the fisherman’s wishes in return for being let go back into the water, as it is in the sea that the fish enjoys its freedom (perhaps the sea is freedom). Crucially, the lot of the fish also matters to the sea. Its lively reactions to the mounting wishes and increasing demands of the fisherman’s wife suggest a strong bond between the sea and the fish. At the beginning (when her request is modest), the sea water is blue, and the fisherman sees its motion: “the sea is rocking slightly” (p. 134). With the next,

46 Conclusion to the chapter. Test 2, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 121.

47 Adam Asnyk, “Baśń tęczowa,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 4, p. 122.

48 Bartmiński, *Słownik*, p. 385.

49 Asnyk, “Baśń,” p. 122. This symbolism of the red sea is indicated by Władysław Kopański, ed., *Słownik symboli*, (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), p. 234.

50 See Katarzyna Grzywka, *Od lasu po góry, od domu po grób... Polska i niemiecka bajka ludowa ze zbiorów Oskara Kolberga i braci Grimm* (Warszawa: Instytut Germanistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2005).

steeper wish coming, “the blue sea roiled up” (p. 135), and when the fisherman’s wife’s claims soared: “The blue sea seethed and rolled” (p. 136). The woman’s demands toward the golden fish further escalating to queenship provoke a response from the sky too, as, interconnected with the sea, it turns from blue into black. The woman’s last demand—to become the empress of the sea—is left unanswered by the fish, but the marine element reacts, perturbed:

A black tempest is raging on the sea,
Wrathful waves have swelled up and bulged,
Churning billows are roaring and howling...⁵¹

The sea snatches away all the gifts the two old people have received, and their life returns to its initial austerity—a hut made of mud and a broken trough.⁵²

The sea responded to the woman’s ever-increasing demands in a series of natural elemental metamorphoses: chromatic alterations, movement of the waves, and intensifying sounds. While natural in themselves, these transmutations were not sparked by natural causes. It was not the common volatility of the weather that prompted the reactions of the sea. In the tale, the hue of the sea water changes from blue to black,⁵³ a color associated with the evil powers, damnation, and death in folk narratives, along with the characters’ rocketing requests. The parallel gradation of the wishes/requisitions of people and the behavior of the sea becomes easily discernible to readers and can be construed as a living creature’s anger. As the narrative unfolds, the sea is also sometimes called the “ocean” and depicted as “deep.”

This folktale vision rather clearly projects the relations of humans and the sea even though the image produced by the text is ambiguous. The fisherman lives close to the sea and knows it. He is receptive to the needs of the sea/the fish; he shows kindness to the fish, and his first thought is to release the fish unconditionally. The fish/the sea responds in like manner. The relationship is marred when the fisherman’s wife enters the stage since she would only like to take from the sea, and the sea effectively protests against that. Today, we would say that the sea calls for its actions to be understood and the limits to its exploitation not to be exceeded. The symbolic image of the relations between the sea and the fisherman’s wife can be a lucid message to contemporary readers regarding proper

51 Aleksander Puszkín, “Bajka o rybaku i złotej rybce,” trans. Julian Tuwim, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 4*, pp. 133–140. For an English translation of Pushkin’s tale in verse, see “The Tale of a Fisherman and a Fish,” trans. Robert Chandler, in *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*, ed. Robert Chandler (London: Penguin Classics: 2012).

52 The English translation of the poem (see footnote 50) has “a washtub cracked in the middle” instead of a trough. (translator’s note)

53 The fifth-grade textbook also talks of “the sapphire sea” in a passage from *Anne from the Green Gables*; Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 5*, p. 218.

attitudes to and treatment of nature, at the same time underscoring the mutability and mysteriousness of the element. Its activeness is also pivotal.

The textbook series contains a salient image of the sea crafted in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s “Legenda żeglarska” [“A Seafaring Legend”], which marshals a well-known motif (a *cultureme*) of the fatherland as a ship.⁵⁴ This image paints the sea as a hostile, unfriendly, and at the same time potent element. Infested with “whirlpools and rocks,” “the salty water has **eaten through** the boards”⁵⁵ of the long-sailing ship, “the waves have ripped off her broadsides, and her masts have moldered through.” The language describing a sea storm conjures up a combat against a mighty and inimical power:

a storm **broke out** the like of which had not been seen at sea before. The winds **blasted** the ocean and the clouds into one **hellish maelstrom**. **Shafts of water** arose and **dashed, roaring, at** The Purple, terrible, churning, and **boiling**. Having nabbed the ship, they **nailed it down to the bottom** of the sea only to **fling** it up to the clouds and **knock it back down to the bottom** again. [...] — The Purple is going down! And, indeed, The Purple was going down...⁵⁶

The text also marshals verbal references to warfare in the description of people’s actions; for example, the sailors “**fire from cannons** at the winds and foaming waves” and “**whip** the sea,” which is regarded as a foe in this symbolic legend.

In lieu of conclusion

What representation of *the sea* emerges from the *Jutro pójdę w świat* textbook series? All the images highlight the elemental power of water. The sea is a vast, abysmal, and boundless space. It is depicted in events, and its features are seldom directly conveyed by language; the verbally expressed qualities of the element are distance, depth, saltiness, and sometimes color: blue (morphing in turbid blue and mirroring the darkened sky) and green (green waves). The behavior of the sea is far more profusely described. The “biblical” sea is ordered and obedient to God. Is it obedient to the human as well? The “mythical” sea, mysterious, un-

54 The ship-as-the-fatherland metaphor was first used by Piotr Skarga in his *Kazania sejmowe* [*Sejm Sermons*] (1597). Piotr Skarga, *Kazania sejmowe*, <https://literat.ug.edu.pl/skarga/index.htm#spis> [accessed 28.02.2024].

55 The first verbal reference to the salty taste of seawater appears in conjunction with its “harmful” effects.

56 Henryk Sienkiewicz, “Legenda żeglarska,” in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat* 6, p. 269. For an English translation of this short story, see Henryk Sienkiewicz, “A Legend of the Sea,” in *Life and Death, and Other Legends and Stories*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1904), pp. 29–40, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35736/pg35736-images.html> [accessed 28.02.2024].

known, and indifferent to the lot of humans, as it is, “closes” its waves over them, reactionless. The “folktale” sea holds riches which it gives and takes away. The latter does not happen without reason, as the wrath of the sea is well founded and manifests itself in an array of activities. Finally, the sea of the legend is pictured from the human perspective as an enemy (whose hostility is human fault) that puts up a fight and is also fought against by humans. This suggests that, in terms of the symbolic presentation of *water*, readers are offered an image that relies on the *sacred/profane* binary, which fundamentally organizes the world in folk cultures. Is such imagery capable of fostering sufficient knowledge and sensibility today? Can it help change people’s attitudes to the environment, including to waters/water? Importantly, the textbooks altogether lack any images relevant to the real, here-and-now meanings⁵⁷ or images revealing the catastrophic condition of the hydrological environment and the adverse effects of climate change on marine and aquatic life. The entire textbook series for three years of school education comprises merely one assignment (in the sixth-grade textbook) in which attention is devoted to the status of the water/pelagic environment. Specifically, the assignment instructs students to:

8. Rewrite the text to your copybook and complete the sentences with proper conditional verb forms. Use the verbs given in parentheses.

In all likelihood, ecological disaster [?] (become) the main problem of life on the Earth. Tons of waste [?] (float) on the surface of the seas. Temperatures [?] (be) so high that glaciers [?] (melt). [...] Perhaps we [?] (manage) to prevent this, provided that all of us [?] (begin) to seriously take care of the environment, starting today.⁵⁸

The seas are home to millions of plants and animals, not only to the golden fish and mythical creatures. Water, with its temperature and chemical processes, and sea currents fuel life on the Earth and make it possible for humanity to exist. We must not be oblivious to that when we teach literature and language, devise textbooks, and select literary texts for young readers. The image of the water/sea environment constructed in texts of oral literature, teeming with the fantastic, is well worth retaining and being made familiar to students in order to cultivate their respect for tradition, but this image must be counterbalanced by today’s realistic image of water and its current predicaments.

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

57 The realistic image of the *sea* is outlined only a handful of times throughout the series, for example in two photographs on the page titled “Polskie krajobrazy” [“Polish Landscapes”] in the fourth-grade textbook. See “Polskie krajobrazy,” teacher material, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 4*, pp. 114–115.

58 “Kraina języka,” teacher material, in Dobrowolska and Dobrowolska, *Jutro pójdę w świat 6*, p. 210.

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Abstract

The author uses ecological discourse analysis combined with the linguistic picture of the world methodology to examine the series of textbooks *Jutro pójdę w świat* [*Tomorrow I Will Set out into the World*] and identify the genres the textbooks use to show symbolic and material forms of aquatic motifs to young readers. These genres include those permeated with the fantastic: folktale, legend, and myth. The passages included in the textbooks contain examples representing the complex and profound symbolism of water in texts stemming from the folk tradition (e. g., water as a living being; water as the primeval ocean associated with all forms of life from which the world emerged), alongside the images of water, especially the sea, as a means of life and a space that connects/divides, harbors treasures, or is a path to a goal/a destination. Applying the environmental humanities perspective, the author interprets the functions and images of aquatic objects, particularly the sea, their axiological dimension, and the tentative aqua-critical message they offer to today's young readers.

Keywords: legend; myth; fairy tale; ecological awareness; water element; linguistic picture of the world; sea; environmental sensitivity.

Alina Mitek-Dziemba

Elemental Ecocriticism and Aquatic Tropes. Rereading the Freshwater Presence in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Introduction: Re-storying the Elements, Re-writing the (Foreign Language) Curriculum

Earth and sky, water and fire are the fundamental elements that bind the fate and presence of humans and other Earthlings in their interlocked journey of matter and imagination. Also the stuff of elemental passions and the light of compositional *jouissance* sparkling into the world's body-mind, these four classical elements are the building blocks of whatever thinks and respires on this living planet. Our blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire—elements that have composed mountains, oceans, and the atmosphere, and have nourished all terrestrial creativities across time and space.¹

The four elements as primal substances or forces underlying all processes of generation, change, and transformation in nature seem destined to figure prominently in the environmental imagination. In fact, as the quotation above pinpoints, from a vantage point of cosmic evolution there may hardly be anything else in the world than this circulation of inherently creative matter, passing through diverse states and conditions. Humans, creatures of soil and water, breathing with air and gathering around fire, join a myriad of life forms in the universe as being similarly composed of elemental ingredients, part of their energy and multidirectional becoming. One may get the impression, following the ancient Greeks, that the only purpose of the Earthlings' existence is to be generated, nourished and finally made extinct in the grand narrative spanning universal time and space. The Anthropos, alongside other beings, is thus belittled to be a single (and passing) articulation of elemental activity on the planet that has been unique in producing habitable conditions for organic life and tirelessly

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1 Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, "Coda. Wandering Elements and Natures to Come," in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 310.

continues to yield new creatures. Inviting macro- and microcosmic comparisons, the fragment quoted allows the reader to bring together divergent perspectives or scales, temporal and spatial, as it bridges the chemical structure of human bodies and the Earth's geological constitution. Yet it also powerfully foregrounds and reenacts material agency, endowing the world with animate or humanlike (spiritual / mental) properties such as the embodied mind, imagination and passions.

This brief discussion of the significance of the elements can be used to illuminate the notion of elemental ecocriticism, a recent unveiling of ecocritical theory and reading practices that has sought to apply anew the old pre-Socratic intuitions about the microscopic composition of the environment and its underlying principles or forces.² The question is, however, why it should be brought back, this outmoded ancient cultural theory long supplanted by scientific investigations into particle and quantum mechanics with its increasingly complex and abstract worldview? As the editors of *Elemental Ecocriticism*, a seminal book on the topic, insist, the new reformulation of ecocritical theory is far from being a project of mere nostalgia or an exercise in uncritical and simplistic epistemology.³ The turn towards the elemental may instead be traced to the growing popularity of eco-materialist paradigms in cultural theory since 2010. The latter have voiced the need for reconsideration of materiality along distinctly non-dualistic lines and inspired new visions of agency located beyond the boundaries of the sociopolitical world.⁴ What has been dubbed a return of the elements is then one possible response to earlier domination of poststructuralist thinking with its clear-cut division into material and discursive or semiotic processes, a paradigm that stressed the primacy of linguistic and social constructions of reality and relegated inorganic matter, as well as other-than-human life forms, to the role of the silent and inert background of human activity. Considering that the dichotomy has played right into the hands of the capitalist market and its reduction of the environment to the status of mere resource or commodity, eco-materialism seeks to foreground agency of the matter in order to reconfigure the stories we tell about

2 Even though a number of the early Greek thinkers referred to one of the elements as constitutive of reality (e.g. Thales, Heraclitus or Anaximenes), it is the Sicilian philosopher who was the first to conceive of them as a set, highlighting their interactions and transformative nature. See Chapter 3 of David Macauley's classic book on the topic, where the author also dwells on the relevance of Empedocles' insights for modern environmental theories: David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 103–136.

3 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, "Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements," in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 4.

4 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Model of Narrativity," *Ecozon@. European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 2012, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75–91.

our natural-cultural reality and enable a more inclusive ethics of worldly coexistence that recognizes multiple Others we are entangled with while also accentuating our vulnerability to the operation of non-human actors.

The purpose of this article is to apply the philosophy behind elemental ecocriticism and its innovative findings to perform a cultural reading of the presence of freshwater bodies in the schoolbooks used for instruction in a foreign language classroom, taking as an example books utilized to teach the Polish language to adult foreigners. Water as one of the primal substances is largely taken for granted here as part of the national landscape and environmental background that sets the stage for the activities and linguistic production of human protagonists. However, little attention is paid to the human exploitation of the natural world and human dependence on elemental forces or exposure to natural disasters aggravated by climate change, focusing rather on the images of rivers, lakes and seas as either ahistorical constituents of national identity or otherwise agreeable environments serving utilitarian purposes (e.g., entertainment or various fields of industry). Scrutinizing the way authors of the handbooks construct the worldview and uncovering the ideologies implicit in the presentation of the learning material may therefore, in our view, highlight the environmental and social costs behind the standard ways of presenting nature in the curriculum and facilitate the future reorientation of education in the humanities (including language instruction) towards embracing a critical pedagogy of the Anthropocene.⁵

The aim of this new teaching model is not only to promote an environmentally conscious vision that recognizes the rapacious nature of Capitalocene⁶ and its actors in their treatment of water, air and earth as mere instrumentalized resources, but also to empower the students to rethink their attitudes to water bodies and other (post)natural forms in their local environment so that they are able to respond by creating new forms and spaces of interaction. It is hoped that by foregrounding rivers, streams, lakes, seas and oceans in the handbooks as vital endangered ecosystems, whose elemental “hostility” is frequently a result of anthropogenic pressures, the recipients of the handbooks may develop awareness of the deep affinity of human beings with water environments and appreciation of the broader role nonhuman beings and forces play in the age of climate emergency. The proposed new narrative is thus aimed at an imaginative re-

5 In the sense of a critically oriented ecopedagogy stemming from the need to uncover, challenge and undermine the neoliberal paradigm of the relationship between nature and human economy that has been voiced and often perpetuated by handbooks used in the Polish educational system. Cf. Piotr Walewicz, “Koncepcje antropocenu i kapitalocenu a ekopedagogika,” *Przegląd Pedagogiczny* 2019, nr 1, pp. 57–67.

6 Cf. the notion of the Capitalocene as explicated in the book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

mapping and possible retelling of regional and national history involving environmental and multispecies perspectives—which can be particularly fascinating and precious when allied with the rediscovery of local culture and its indigenous mythological heritage that used to imagine and orchestrate the elements rather differently.

Repressed Elementality, or What Comes Back With a Vengeance

Why the elements? There is no other naturecultural presence that asserts its power more violently and more frequently in contemporary times, ravaging otherwise serene localities, than the four well-known pre-Socratic *archai*: water, air, earth and fire. Accustomed to witnessing a variety of extreme weather events around the globe and watching them with an increasing sense of frustration, we respond with shock and disbelief whenever an elemental activity is launched nearby, affecting our compatriots and familiar landscapes. We are awakened to the recognition of an inhuman power of the scale surpassing our understanding and to a simultaneous admission of our own estrangement and vulnerability as a species. The presence of post-disaster trauma, once triggered on rare occasions and then processed for many years (or even generations) by inhabitants in affected areas, has become all-pervasive, especially among the communities least culpable for environmental damage. It is no longer viewed as an “accident” or “stumble” in an otherwise steady march of civilizational history documenting human victory over nature. Such overlapping traumatic experiences may lead to serious psychosomatic disorders:

In the case of trauma [...], we are dealing with an experience that is so extreme to human subjects that it alters their perception and interpretation of the world, as well as their self-understanding. Individuals are then deprived of any possibility of response; therefore, terror and powerlessness, arising as primary sensations, wreak havoc with their mechanisms of mental regulation, down to the very essence of existence. [...] This condition contributes to a chronic sense of threat, resulting in psychobiological and neurochemical dysfunction.⁷

If trauma denotes a serious disruption of individual and social lives, its disturbing effects can normally be overcome with time through a long therapeutic effort aimed at regaining the emotional equilibrium. In the quoted discussion of a traumatic experience, related to a major catastrophic occurrence of the past (the

⁷ Elżbieta Zdankiewicz-Ściagała, Monika Przybylska, *Trauma. Proces i diagnoza. Mechanizmy psychoneurofizjologiczne*, [as quoted in:] Janina Hajduk-Nijakowska, *Żywioł i kultura. Folklorystyczne mechanizmy osvajania traumy* (Opole: Uniwersytet Opolski, 2005), p. 19 [translation – A.M.Dz].

1997 flooding of the terrains along the Odra river in the south of Poland, known as the Millennium Flood), the author stresses its exceptionality and represents it as a watershed event which has left a permanent scar in the collective memory—one that can be healed by means of cultural narratives. However, the current reality of climate emergency means that human and non-human communities are faced with devastating changes in their surroundings on a regular basis, following repeated instances of floods, droughts, wildfires, superstorms, tornadoes, hurricanes, earth slides, disastrous air conditions and heat or cold waves. It thus becomes increasingly difficult for both individuals and societies to integrate such “monstrous,” extraordinary climate events into their aesthetic and cultural imagination. The response is that of bewilderment and alienation, followed by the acknowledgement of one’s “climatological entanglement”⁸ with the place in which one is situated. Individuals and societies alike are forced to live with an altered, displaced sense of “home,” while their local ecosystems find themselves bereft and defencelessly exposed to sudden shocks in the form of unpredictable and unprecedented (un)natural occurrences.

Vis maior, superior force, force majeure, höhere Gewalt—this is how different languages and legal systems have learnt to recognize and validate the possibility of violent and irresistible actions that are not to be anticipated or remain beyond human control. These events used to be called natural disasters or ‘acts of God,’⁹ yet one may wonder whether the agent in question is indeed supernatural or whether it is actually nature that is to blame. In fact, we are dealing here with environmental forces which are volatile, unruly and constantly under reconstruction, and ones whose instability has long been due to human tinkering with the climate. The realisation of the extent of anthropogenic pressure may soon give rise to a major change in their perception. The elements, though commonly addressed as threatening, disruptive and unpredictable, have previously been treated as figurations of nature whose “acts of anger” is something benevolent humanity has to deal with, without allowing it to undermine human sovereignty. However, it may be noticed that the awareness of repressed elemental agency as an independent nonhuman power with which one has to count is latent in the legal clauses evoking “superior violence” of external origin¹⁰ and

8 Cf. Moritz Ingwersen and Timo Müller, “The Aesthetics and Politics of Elemental Agency,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 2022, vol. 70 (1), p. 4.

9 See the article explaining the usage of the term *vis maior* from the perspective of insurance law, where it is shown as “irresistible natural occurrence” that suspends legal order: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/vis-major.asp> [accessed 31.01.2024]. Notably, a *vis maior* clause was introduced into the Polish labour law in 2023, allowing employees to be exempt from work in unforeseen circumstances.

10 In the ruling of the European Tribunal for Justice, for instance, *force majeure* is referred to as “abnormal and unforeseeable circumstances, outside the control of the operator concerned, the consequences of which, in spite of the exercise of all due care, could not have been

evidenced in the way the agency evokes both fear and a sense of aesthetic sublimity in observers: “How did we forget that matter is a precarious system and dynamic entity, not a reservoir of tractable commodities? How did we cease to know that earth, air, fire, and water move, rebel, ally, crush, and desire?”, ask Jeffrey J. Cohen and Lowell Duckert rhetorically.¹¹ Climate change may be referred to as the revenge of the elements, part of the larger story of impending catastrophe and subsequent renewal that both the ancient and modern thinkers have liked to tell, yet there is no denying that elemental activity as a separate source of power can no longer be overlooked or dismissed. And there is no doubt that traditional philosophical paradigms, with their mechanistic outlooks, are ill-equipped to cope with the epistemic challenge such nonhuman agency presents.

This is what material ecocriticism willingly dwells on, in its current form inspired by the ‘post-sustainable’¹² mindset of the Anthropocene. It embarks on the re-examination of the philosophy of the elements as a “storehouse of provocations for present environmentality” and “a lush archive for thinking ecology anew.”¹³ It brings home to everyone involved in the global conversation on the future of the planet that elemental thinking may amount to “a revolutionary act of eradicating the human exploitation of natural elements” and of redefining embodiment, performed in the world “where each element of nature is attributed an economic value and turned into a commercialized product through taming and subordinating.”¹⁴ Though certainly not a new field, the consideration of the elements from the eco-materialist perspective seems to combine the insights of phenomenological aesthetics (provided for example by the influential studies of material imagination in Gaston Bachelard’s *oeuvre*¹⁵) and of new materialism with its post-anthropocentric belief in the agency and vibrancy of the matter. If nature is viewed here as animated, vigorous and capable of producing new

avoided” (Gergely Szemerely v. Miniszterelnökséget vezető miniszter, Case C-330/14, 58; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62014CJ0330> [accessed 12.02.2024]).

11 Cohen and Duckert, “Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements,” p. 5.

12 A ‘post-sustainable’ position is defined here in terms of the “epistemic imbalance” arising from the acute awareness of the fast-accelerating global environmental crisis and the simultaneous perception one has of the inadequacy of the methodological tools offered by the sustainable development theoretical framework (moderate environmentalism). For a more detailed explanation, see Pasi Takkinen, Jani Pulkki and Tere Vadén, “From the Archimedean Point to Circles in the Sand—Post-Sustainable Curriculum and the Critical Subject,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2023.2274275>.

13 Cohen and Duckert, “Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements,” p. 4.

14 Dilek Bulut Sarikaya, “An Exploration of *Riders to the Sea* from the Perspective of Elemental Ecocriticism,” *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 2020, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 73–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2020.1867817>.

15 Cf. Roch C. Smith, *Gaston Bachelard: Philosopher of Science and Imagination*, edition revised and updated (Albany: State University of New York, 2016), pp. 68–86.

meanings, co-constituting naturecultural narratives,¹⁶ then the elemental emerges as the very paradigm of nonhuman agency. Illustrating how matter articulates itself both in violent natural occurrences and in the aesthetic experiences they give rise to, the concept of elementality entails, at the same time, reframing the stories in nonhuman scales. And one effect of such a reconceptualization is challenging the conventional perception of the elements as hostile and primitive natural forces that must be restrained and brought under control (as instances of mindless matter) in order to restore lost harmony in the dualistic, human-governed universe. Indeed, neither the old mind-matter dichotomy nor the pastoralist nostalgia for a natural primaevial order is still an available option today.

What can be made of the elements, then, in this new theoretical framework? As the etymology of the word makes clear, they refer to something fundamental and originary, yet thoroughly material, that underlies all changes of natural phenomena: be it the first principles of the pre-Socratic philosophers, the alchemists' basic substances undergoing transmutation, chemical elements in the periodic table, or the alphabet (Greek *stoicheia*, Latin *elementa*, Polish *elementarz*¹⁷). In the famous description we owe to Empedocles, these four primaevial forces are portrayed as roots (*rhizomata*) enveloping and interacting with all matter, attracted to each other by love and distancing themselves in a sort of universal discord.¹⁸ Their condition is that of entanglement and unceasing generation of ephemeral alliances, as well as fierce conflicts, resembling Deleuze and Guattari's "polyamorous" universe of becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus*¹⁹. Yet the elements are also, as Bachelard believed, the building blocks of human imagination and culture, archetypal poetic figures that vitally connect human body-minds with their surroundings. Ubiquitous in early human cults and myths, their presence forms the scaffolding of the collective unconscious that seems to assist communities in ordering an ever-changing reality around by conjuring up images

16 Iovino and Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism," p. 79.

17 Strictly speaking, the Greek term *stoicheion* has a broader meaning, referring not only to the components of language (conceived as sounds, not letters), but also to material causes and first principles. Interestingly, it also denotes a shadow of the gnomon (which underscores the term's connection to change and temporality). The Polish word is a name of the book used to teach basic literacy skills to children.

18 S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve, eds., *Readings in Ancient Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle. Fourth Edition* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), p. 53, 61.

19 "Deleuze and Guattari stress the significance of symbioses in this process [of evolution], greatly extending Empedocles' notion of attraction (like to like) and the forces of *philia* (love) to include beings of different kingdoms with no conceivable filiation. Their notions of 'becoming-animal'—through, among other ways, sorcery—and even *becoming-elementary*, -molecular or -cellular are especially relevant to an understanding of the elements, the environment and Empedocles." Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, pp. 135–136.

that are both grounded in matter and thought to belong to the metaphysical or spiritual world.²⁰ This intermediary character of elementality—evident in concepts like material agency or storied matter—may prove vital to the research combining ecomaterialism and postsecularity.²¹

To scholars in the environmental humanities, addressing the challenges of the human-defined geological epoch, the elements as agents of nature require an urgent reconsideration in the face of climate instability. Elemental “matter-phors”²² in literature, or poetic devices drawing on and mobilizing material imagination, appear to simultaneously implicate humans back in the environmental fabric and displace the *Anthropos* from the centre of attention and its previously occupied position of power. More precisely, elemental tropes both belittle the human presence and lay bare the porosity of nature-culture boundary within the microcosm of a human body, which is itself constituted by basic substances and open to their flows or intermingling, to return to the initial observation of this article: “Our blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire”. Through exposure to the violence of elemental powers, the human body is stripped of its privilege of distanced contemplation and at the same time forced to acknowledge its intimate link to the ambient conditions, as well as, inescapably, its share in vulnerability. This entanglement leads to epistemological confusion, challenging the very distinction between the subject, object and medium of sensory perception.²³ The previous posture of aloof, critical detachment is thus replaced by a state of immersion, which paves the way for new, radically embodied, sympoietic narratives. Ecomaterialism does not only aim at remapping the physical universe; it also remaps the human body, rendering it open, generative and hospitable to novel ways of mattering.

The process of liquidating human autonomy and distributing agency across the living world is also coupled with the recognition of different non-human (macro- and microcosmic) scales, a multitude of spatial and temporal orders, each offering its own other-than-human story. Apart from destabilising the anthropocentric perspective, the elements yield their own, peculiar narratives, engaging the recipients on sensory and affective levels. To lend them voice is no easy task, as they normally elude our intellectual grasp and narrative modes, being tiny or gigantic, imperceptible or deafening. Hence the idea of anthropomorphising:

20 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, p. 66.

21 Cf. Patrick Curry, “Post-Secular Nature: Principles and Politics,” *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, 2007, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 284–304.

22 Daniela Gandorfer and Zulaikha Ayub, “Introduction: Matterphorical,” *Theory & Event* 2021, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 2–13.

23 Ingwersen and Müller, “The Aesthetics and Politics,” p. 8.

Through strategic anthropomorphisms—speaking of the elements as if we could know the elements, allying with air, water, fire, and earth to comprehend what exceeds us in scale—real entities that too often vanish into abstraction become tangible, urgent. Climate may be difficult to grasp, but storm and swelter are unmistakable. Ecologies become intimate, even as they retain a wildness dangerous and alluring.²⁴

Anthropomorphic language, attributing vivacity and mental properties to non-human substances, forces and phenomena, is not just a mode of literary expression that appeals to children’s imagination. It refers us back to premodern ways of interacting with the environment, based on relationality and reciprocity: an enchanted world, composed of a variety of forms of living, each capable of “answering back” to human actions. It is a view of the cosmos filled with wonder, spirit and energy: what Patrick Curry defines as “varying degrees and modes of participation in the world—or, better, worlds—among an effectively infinite number of other agents and agenda.”²⁵ Elemental ecocriticism thus seeks to empower other-than-human beings by crediting them with the ability to create independent meaning and value, in the way that is similar to animistic ontologies, where each entity is considered alive, expressive and sacred.²⁶ It pictures a world replete with animated natural subjects and their unique forms of interaction, a world brimming with material narratives. In Ingwersen and Müller’s words, elemental imagination “harkens back to a time when the gap between word and world, sign and referent, [...] was narrow, yet to be rigidified into the categorical modern divide of nature and culture.”²⁷ Following in the footsteps of ancient myth-makers or indigenous storytellers, elemental poetics strives to recover the full potency of the four environmental actors, which are construed here as material-semantic phenomena: forces of nature inextricably intertwined with cultural narratives and capable of communicating their own meanings. And it does so precisely to resist the modern disenchantment of nature, its de-animation, which once rendered the natural world pliant and defenceless at the hands of capitalist entrepreneurs.

24 Cohen and Duckert, “Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements,” pp. 11–12.

25 Curry, “Post-Secular Nature,” p. 286.

26 I refer here to a growing number of publications dealing with new animism, a term coined by Graham Harvey in 2015 to discuss indigenous worldviews as a form of relational ontology and developed by many scholars with reference to new materialism. See, for example, a following essay merging environmental science and animism: Stephen Harding, “Towards an Animistic Science of the Earth,” in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 374–384.

27 Ingwersen and Müller, “The Aesthetics and Politics,” p. 7.

Elemental Lessons: The Way of Water

What lessons, then, can be learnt from an approach to language teaching that is based on elemental ecocriticism, striving to make students acutely aware of their involvement with the powers of nature, both inside the human body and in the external world, at the time when these elements are themselves subject to most unnatural pressures? And how can the attitudes of teachers and the contents of schoolbooks used for instruction interrogate the long entrenched ideas and ideologies relating to the environment so that new forms of knowledge and ways of interacting with the elemental factors could come into existence and flourish? The following investigation will only be concerned with water and the presence of freshwater bodies in various thematic clusters that are contained in the learning materials, but it proceeds in the hope that suggested solutions may then be extended to the rest of the elements. A desirable outcome of this new model of language instruction would be, for both teachers and students, an incentive to ponder over one's elemental entanglement and question the purely utilitarian narrative with relation to water environments through a new, eco- and biocentric imagery in representations of nature and the environmental crisis—so as to generate socially and ecologically responsible stories of change in the educational framework.

As one of the mightiest forces operating in the Earth's ecosystem, as well as a crucial life-sustaining resource, water has long been the staple of environmental thinking. Its role was soon noticed by early Greek philosophers, whose pre-scientific reflection centred upon the elements—articulating in tentatively naturalistic terms what had been expressed before in the language of cult and myth. Water as a source of life, constituting all organisms, undergoing perpetual transformations and regulating the patterns of early human settlements, was rightly identified as *arche*, a cause and primaeva foundation of all things, spiritual and material at the same time. David Macaulay notes how simple ancient observations of water's properties—its fluidity, incessant movement, processual changes and rhythmic interaction with other elements—may have given rise to related philosophical insights in the East and in the West.²⁸ It is worth noting that the conception of the world as a dynamic whole based on the transformation of basic elemental powers (varying in numbers) emerged almost simultaneously in Indian, Chinese, and Greek cultures.²⁹ From the very beginning, water has been approached with utmost reverence, as a material substance and form of energy

28 Macaulay, *Elemental Philosophy*, p. 43.

29 Cf. Marzenna Jakubczak, "Earth," in *Aesthetics of the Four Elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air*, ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Ostrava: University of Ostrava and Tilia Publishers, 2001), pp. 15–27.

that is deeply ambivalent: both fragile and powerful, adaptable and unyielding, nourishing and annihilating. Hence the abundance of symbolical meanings attributed to the element in different cultures, as well as the presence of water in numerous rites of passage, where it could refer to cleansing and rebirth, or, contrariwise, to degeneration, pollution and death. Hence also the proliferation of cultural narratives explicating the mystery and agency of water to early human communities.

The authors of *Aesthetics of Four Elements*, a 2001 book devoted to the *topoi* of water, earth, fire and earth in different cultures, religions and branches of art, draw attention to both the physical and phenomenological diversity of the elemental forms with which people are confronted and interact in the course of their lives. Their account points to a great abundance of water bodies and their accompanying infrastructure, whether the water in question is seen as still (“puddles, ponds, lakes, dams, and wells”) or moving (“springs, fountains, creeks, rapids, streams, rivers, seas, oceans, waterfalls, weirs, rains, and floods”). In addition, water can easily combine with the other elements such as air, forming “mists, dew, steam, bubbles, clouds, fogs, rainbow,” or change into more solid forms. Its distribution and constant circulation in nature has earned it a reputation for being notoriously changeable and unpredictable, almost beyond any scientific control.³⁰ Moreover, water can be experienced in infinite ways through bodily contact, producing a variety of aesthetic sensations, whether visual, auditory, tactile or gustatory (relating to taste). While in motion, it may produce numerous acoustic effects, received as monotonous (rain) or stimulating and communicative (gurgling, babbling, splashing or roaring). It is also possible for a single human body to have an overall kinaesthetic experience of the aquatic environment through immersion, which may be either pleasurable or threatening (as in the case of drowning or being overflooded). Interestingly, the authors end their description of water environments by stressing that “the world of water is not built from ‘discrete’ objects we are used to dealing with on land, but rather from forces, energies, and mutual relations with all other parts of the universe.”³¹ The agency of water, similarly to the other elements, is thus not so much expressible in terms of states and substances, as in terms of ongoing transformations, flows of energy and dynamic interconnections.

This phenomenological and philosophical description of the aquatic element needs to be yet confronted with the historical and social realities of its existence, especially with the part it plays in the national myth-making. There is no doubt that water resources, especially seas, rivers and lakes, have been central to mapping national and regional territories, indicating best sites of settlement and

30 Zdeňka Kalnická, “Water,” in *Aesthetics of the Four Elements: Earth, Water, Fire*, p. 102.

31 Zdeňka Kalnická, “Water,” in *Aesthetics of the Four Elements: Earth, Water, Fire*, p. 106.

enabling further development of settler communities in terms of farming, mining and, later, industry. Most ancient civilizations evolved in the vicinity of water (they are even divided by some scholars according to their economic reliance on rivers, seas or oceans³²), and the presence of flowing water has been critical to the rise of densely populated towns and cities. Later efforts at colonizing foreign lands have also been coupled with pursuing the course of large rivers (seen as essential communication routes) from estuaries up to their sources.³³ And yet, as environmental historians argue, the role of the banks of rivers or coastal areas should not be reduced to that of a physical landscape conducive to human settlement; their significance has stemmed from the fact of being a crucial interface between biological and cultural realities. Water bodies, those “natural pulses of energy, fluid, and matter”³⁴ on planet Earth, vehicles of elemental power, are mostly vital as the foci of complex cultural narratives, constituting local or national identities, and documenting the changing human relationship to the environment. Some of them seem to span whole historical epochs and political formations, confronting the long temporal dimension of the bio- and geosphere with the violent twists and turns of human history, as the following quotation from Victor Hugo’s guide on the river Rhine well indicates:

You know, for I have often told you, that I love rivers; they do more than bear merchandise—ideas float along their surface. Rivers, like clarions, sing to the ocean of the beauty of the land, the fertility of the plains, the splendour of cities, and of the glory of man. [...] I never think of rivers—those great works of nature, which are also great works of history—without emotion. [...] The Rhine—providential flood—seems to be a symbolic stream. In its windings, in its course, in the midst of all that it traverses, it is, so speaking, the image of civilization, to which it has been so useful, and which it will serve. It flows from Constance to Rotterdam; from the country of eagles to the village of herrings; from the city of popes, of councils, and of emperors, to the counter of the merchant and of the citizen; from the great Alps themselves, to that immense body of water which we term *ocean*.³⁵

Hugo’s description, swooning over the magnificence and turbulent history of the Rhine, is notable in stressing the utilitarian value of waterways to the societies which have flourished on the nearby territories. In his pathos-laden account, the mighty European river seems to bear silent witness to the incessant expansion

32 See Andrzej Piskozub, *Rzeki w dziejach cywilizacji* [Rivers in the History of Civilizations] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2001), p. 13.

33 See chapter 3. “Rzeki jako przedmiot odkryć geograficznych,” [Rivers as the Subject of Geographical Discovery] in: Piskozub, *Rzeki*, pp. 55–86.

34 James Syvitski, “Foreword,” in *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, eds. Jason M. Kelly et al. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), p. xi.

35 Victor Hugo, *The Rhine*, trans. David Mitchell Aird (London: D. Aird, 1843), available at <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=sHcGAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PA116&hl=pl> [accessed 17.02.2024], p. 109, 117.

of each respective nation it flows through, reflecting the bustling city life and serving the needs of industry on the river banks. This cultural narrative of utility and subservience has been subject to much criticism in the age of the Anthropocene, which is marked by pressing ecological concerns such as water insecurity and biodiversity loss. Recent studies of river ecosystems have drawn attention to their increasing commodification, a process accompanying numerous technological modifications of riverbeds in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which led to a series of negative anthropogenic changes such as chemical contamination, endangerment of the aquatic wildlife and exhaustion of freshwater resources.³⁶ The list of offences against the wellbeing of land waters is however much longer, including the proliferation of algae in changed saline conditions and their potential harm to plants, animals and people, illegal dumping, construction of unsustainable dams, wetland disappearance and instrumental manipulation of water bodies in military conflicts, such as the recent (2023) breach of the Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine. Fresh water is not an easily renewable resource and its uneven distribution and shrinking worldwide may lead to even more “water wars” in the foreseeable future.³⁷ Hence the examination of past and present narratives describing the coexistence of water bodies with human and non-human populations, found in literary sources and public discourse, may provide a boost to river restoration, helping to rethink the culturally dominant views of the hydrosphere and to avert the trauma of water deficiency.

If Hugo is right about the significance of rivers to cultural identities, writing that “ideas float along their surface,” then the question of water and local aqueous bodies should also be vital to the authors of handbooks used for instruction in foreign language learning, aimed at familiarizing the students with the speech of the country in question and its geographical and cultural realities. In what follows we will analyse the presence of water in the learning materials used to teach Polish to adult foreigners, taking into account not only the depictions of physical places and attached maps or illustrations but also all the contexts in which the aquatic element seems to play a vital role, for example in the presentation of folk customs, hobbies and leisure activities, or health and nutrition issues. The examination of the contents of handbooks will help us investigate how the perception of water interacts with and shapes the narratives of national and regional identities, what place is accorded to water bodies in urban cartographies, and to what extent the awareness of environmental crisis and poor water management surfaces in the discussion of the challenges facing the community of the Polish speakers in the 21st century. Furthermore, the aquatic im-

36 Jason M. Kelly, “Preface,” in *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, p. xvii.

37 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, p. 49.

agency used in the handbooks will also be scrutinised against the claims of elemental ecocriticism, revealing the way agency of non-human agents and elemental entanglement of human bodies is highlighted or hidden in the process of language learning, and suggesting possible changes to the curriculum.

Tracing the Presence of Water in the Polish Language Handbooks

The analysis will take into consideration seven handbooks directed at adolescent or adult learners of the Polish language: publications whose aim is to prepare the students to develop their proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (A1-C2).³⁸ For the purpose of comparison, we have decided to focus on three books published between the years 2003 and 2013, while the remaining ones belong to the most recent period (2013–2023). Their contents are shaped to a large extent by the requirements for the Certificate Examinations in Polish, held by the State Commissions for the Certification of Proficiency in Polish as a Foreign Language since 2004. The regulation issued by the Polish Ministry of Education in 2016 largely determines the thematic scope of the materials preparing foreign students for a certificate exam at each respective level of language competence (indicating not only the areas of vocabulary to be covered by language speakers but also required registers, communicative roles, grammatical issues and narrative forms).³⁹ Hence the choice of the topics han-

38 The following Polish handbooks will be considered here: Agnieszka Madeja and Barbara Morcinek, *Polski mniej obcy* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe “Śląsk,” 2007), henceforth referred to as PMO; Ewa Lipińska and Elżbieta Grażyna Dąmbaska, *Kiedys wrócisz tu... Część I: Gdzie nadwiślański brzeg. Poziom B2* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), first edition 2003, henceforth as KWT1; Ewa Lipińska and Elżbieta Grażyna Dąmbaska, *Kiedys wrócisz tu... Część II: By szukać swoich dróg i gwiazd. Poziom C1* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), first edition 2005, henceforth as KWT2; Barbara Guziuk-Świca, Grażyna Przechodzka, Agnieszka Roczniak and Maria Zielińska, *Język polski bez granic. Poziom B2* (Warszawa and Lublin: Stowarzyszenie Wspólnota Polska, 2018), henceforth as JPBG; Małgorzata Małolepsza and Aneta Szymkiewicz, *Hurra!!! Po polsku 1* (Kraków: Prolog, 2022), henceforth as HPP1; Agnieszka Dixon and Agnieszka Jasińska, *Hurra!!! Po polsku 2* (Kraków: Prolog, 2020), henceforth as HPP2; Agnieszka Dixon, Agnieszka Jasińska, Małgorzata Małolepsza and Aneta Szymkiewicz, *Hurra!!! Po polsku 3* (Kraków: Prolog, 2021), henceforth as HPP3.

39 See the current regulation of the Ministry of Education (2016), which suggests familiarity with the following thematic areas by a candidate seeking certification: the human being and human relationships, household and its surroundings, everyday living, education, leisure, sport and hobbies, travelling and means of transport, human physiology, health issues and ailments, work and professions, shopping, food and food industry, services and their localization, natural environment, customs and traditions, including religious and national holidays, technology and the media, social and political institutions (the catalogue of topics and their detailed treatment differs at each level of competence: <https://www.infor.pl/akt-prawn y/DZU.2016.061.0000405.rozporzadzenie-ministra-nauki-i-szkolnictwa-wyzszego-w-sprawi e-egzaminow-z-jezyka-polskiego-jako-obcego.html> [accessed 17.02.2024]).

dled by the coursebooks may be similar; the differences concern the extent to which the linguistic data are intertwined with cultural ideas and set within specific geographical contexts (typically referring to preferred localities, for example one of the Polish cities or regions). The authors of the books also tend to make divergent choices with regard to the selection of literary texts or samples of popular culture introduced in order to enrich purely linguistic exercises and recreate the natural communicative environment. Finally, there may be some obvious differences in terms of the teaching methodology adopted in the coursebooks and their layout, reflecting the technical possibilities available at the time of their publication.

The presence of the aquatic element in the educational materials is thus limited to the range of topics selected by the authorities as useful for students of Polish as a foreign language, yet its actual occurrence may vary, depending on the approach and resourcefulness of each realization. Typically, the handbooks in question make references to water as part of the urban landscape (rivers, fountains, wells, ponds and lakes), in the context of tourism and holiday destinations, in the discussion of the means of transport and transport routes, and in less directly connected thematic clusters such as cooking and nutrition, the constitution of human body, daily routine and water sports activities, weather conditions, environmental problems, the flora and fauna of Poland, as well as Polish customs or folk traditions. Some textbooks also seek to trace the presence of water in Polish phrases and idioms, documenting all the different connotations the word may have in colloquial usage (signalling, for example, a sense of insecurity and threat, the notions of depth and excess, or of silence and mystery⁴⁰). In the discussion below we will attempt to investigate each reference to water and water bodies, with the intention to contrast the approaches of older handbooks with those of contemporary ones. The working hypothesis behind the examination is the idea that the number of references, as well as the extent of their ideological engagement, will increase in more recent publications, reflecting the growing social awareness of environmental problems and the affective potential of the current climate crisis. In addition, the analysis will highlight the presence of water as one of the elements constituting the microcosm of human existence, striving to articulate its agential materiality.

40 PMO, p. 179.

1. Water in the urban landscape and on the maps of the country

Even though the national-patriotic rhetoric of the Polish state commonly refers to its bond with the rivers (the Vistula, symbolically spanning the whole territory of the country, “from the sea to the mountains”, the Oder, forming the boundary between Poland and Germany, the Warta, the Bug, the Dunajec and many others), it seems that its presence on the map and in the urban landscape is not something that the learners may take for granted. In the handbooks published earlier, which do not contain as many illustrations, the focus is on the description of specific cities or towns the authors have selected for the presentation of geographical features. Admittedly, two of the handbooks are inaugurated with the quote from a popular song by Irena Santor (*Powróćisz tu*, released in 1967), depicting a nostalgic image of the homeland one misses and longs for: “You will return here, to the Vistula bank / you will return here from behind seven mountains and rivers / you will return here, to the sun-tinged heather and hawthorn / you will return here, to the sand on the Masovian roads.”⁴¹ However, whenever the books by Ewa Lipińska and Elżbieta Grażyna Dąmbska embark on describing Poland’s major cities such as Cracow and Warsaw, there is hardly any reference to the fact of urban centres being located on the Vistula River. The authors enumerate numerous famous buildings and monuments, give details of general infrastructure and chronicle the most important events—eschewing any mention of the water bodies (with the single exceptions of the river trade on the Vistula and the emblem of Warsaw, the Mermaid). The third handbook, *Polski mniej obcy*, slightly differs from the approach by explicitly quoting the local river Olsa as constitutive of the settlement in the area of Cieszyn, a border town in the south of Poland⁴²—the text, however, revolves around archaeology, not the contemporary reality, and narrates the story of human development against the environmental background where the river is supposed to fit in with the emerging housing. In contradistinction, the recently published coursebooks use plenty of illustrations that display water in urban surroundings, either in the form of maps featuring major Polish rivers⁴³ or photos accompanying texts.⁴⁴ There is much more water in the accounts of different locations, yet one still gets the impression that its function, in most cases, boils down to providing a picturesque decoration or silent company to human endeavours. In the urban landscape the presence of water is subdued: it never manifests itself as an essential life-sustaining resource or a violent element capable of threatening in-

41 KWT2, p. 11 [translation – A.M.Dz.].

42 PMO, p. 16.

43 HPP1, p. 7, 108; HPP2, p. 117.

44 JPBG, p. 78; HPP2, p. 122.

frastructure.⁴⁵ Moreover, some city maps completely erase the existence of rivers, relying on the purely anthropocentric perspective. With only a few scattered references to the problem of water pollution, it seems that the question of water bodies still escapes public attention.⁴⁶

2. Water in transport and tourism, holiday destinations and leisure activities

The context in which aqueous bodies certainly abound is that of transport and tourism. Most handbooks include water in the discussion of the means of transport (ships, ferries, boats, barges), as well as popular tourist destinations, where the localization near water is seen as a tremendous asset. In this thematic cluster, it is notably easy to encounter the accounts of idyllic landscapes framed by water bodies such as seas (the Baltic or the Mediterranean Sea) or lakes (mainly the Masurian Lake District). Obviously, the majority of learning materials for students of the Polish language mention such iconic places as the Valley of Five Polish Ponds in the Tatra mountains or seaside resorts on the coast. In all the handbooks under examination water is considered to be an attractive environment for holiday adventure and leisure activities such as water sports, even though spending holiday time by the Baltic Sea tends to be associated with capricious weather conditions. Ideally, tourists travelling to Poland spend their leisure time in peaceful surroundings featuring lakes or the sea, sometimes also camping by a mountain creek or rafting on a “wild” river. The representations of nature are to a large extent idealized, with illustrations depicting the scenery in clear blue, green, white and yellow colours, and suggesting harmony within the local ecosystem, never violated by the human visitors. This ties in with the vision of the Polish countryside as a rural paradise which is both a nature reserve, a haven of peace protected against civilizational pressures and a refuge of traditional moral values.⁴⁷ Interestingly, two of the coursebooks also feature a reference to an image of utopia by depicting a perfect “happy island” on which one can

45 Flooding is only referred to as a minor incident one may have to face due to the failure of the sewage system (the problem of a flooded apartment), which is part of the lesson on available urban services (HPP3, p. 68, 122).

46 A reference to the pollution of the Vistula river surfaces in the topic devoted to contemporary environmental problems; the association, however, seems mostly negative, with the noisy campaigns of environmental activists protesting against water contamination and biodiversity loss (HPP3, p. 135–136). The second reference occurs in the discussion of the possible danger connected with swimming in a polluted local pond in Silesia (HPP2, p. 60).

47 In one of the handbooks, a lesson on the environment and animals is based on the archaic vision of the Polish countryside as a privileged place of contact with nature and one that has retained its conservative character by clinging to tradition, as well as moral and religious values (HPP2, p. 59).

dwell without being disturbed by external (material, environmental, social) concerns. The first quotes a literary text by the early twentieth-century poet, Konstanty Idelfons Gałczyński, entitled *Prośba o wyspy szczęśliwe*, which links the presence of calm water environment with reverie and contemplation, leading to a sense of serenity and fulfilment (notably, the text is preceded by the story of a holiday stay by one of the Masurian lakes).⁴⁸ The second image is more detailed, picturing a fictitious island ‘Relaksandia’ (in Polish, relax zone), with various locations marked on the schematic map: a capital city called Utopia, a village Cichowo (literally, ‘a silent place’), the Warm Lake, the Cold River, as well as harbour, beach, convent, castle, the High Mountains and the National Park with the telling name ‘Nirwandia’ (meaning ‘place where one can achieve the state of nirvana’). The task of the learners includes proposing leisure activities for visitors to the perfect island and discussing different future options in terms of environmental planning and land development (for example, by suggesting the expansion of existing infrastructure to meet the needs of the tourist industry: “what can you build there with 1 million euro?”).⁴⁹ The image of the island seems thus to be an interesting example of the anthropocentric representation of the environment fuelled by the utopia of balance between ‘unspoilt’ nature and human civilization, whose needs the former is obliged to serve. Quite significantly, though water bodies are prominent on the island (sea, lake, river), the centre of human activity, a densely populated and industrialized capital city, is imagined as completely self-sufficient, *without* any access to fresh water. One can only muse about its unsustainable relation to the rest of the paradisiac island.

3. Water and the human body

Foreign language handbooks commonly teach the topic of human physiology together with the related themes of nutrition, health and emotions, sometimes extending the discussion even further to include weather conditions that affect and shape an individual bodily experience. The well-being of a human body is naturally connected to the circulation of basic substances, following the metabolic exchange of gases and fluids between organisms and the environment. This exchange can be called elemental insofar as it involves two of the ancient primal principles, water and air. It is worth recalling here that elemental materiality has been mapped across the human body in the ancient image of Hippocrates’ four humours, acknowledging the intimate relationship of the soma with the uni-

48 JPBG, p. 84.

49 HPP1, p. 101.

verse.⁵⁰ Human beings are evolutionarily creatures of water, emerging at birth from the liquid environment and composed of saline fluids that closely resemble oceans.⁵¹ That is why it is interesting to observe how water enters into the discussion of human welfare. In the handbooks the conjoined reference to water and the body occurs in the consideration of human emotions that produce visible bodily symptoms (tears, sweat), as well as essential human needs such as thirst or hunger (presenting nutritional requirements which point to the necessity of water consumption⁵²). It is however not accompanied by any deeper understanding of the role of water in human life, apart from commonsensical indications of what constitutes a well-balanced diet or healthy lifestyle. At times, however, the link between the circulation of water in micro- and macrocosmic contexts becomes all too obvious, as is the case with the lesson focusing on meteoropathy (sensitivity to changing weather conditions) and on the general well-being associated with both the impact of weather and sufficient levels of water in the human body. The lesson is illustrated by a picture of a person crying and watching rain beat against the window.⁵³ It can be said that strikingly many situations in the human life appear to take place with water in the background and it is tempting to highlight the coincidence from the perspective of elemental ecocriticism. The bodily contact with water may then be examined in non-dualistic terms as the dynamic transformation of living matter which adopts a multitude of forms and enables cross-bodily connections.

4. Water in environmental contexts

As expected, the largest number of references to water can be spotted in the sections of the handbooks devoted to the introduction of vocabulary connected with nature and the analysis of environmental problems. In this respect, one may observe the gradual shifting of attitudes towards the predicament of the natural world with time. The earliest coursebooks published after 2000 seem to be largely aware of the existing threats and voice some mild criticism of human activity abusing nature (for example, by criticising the production of rubbish, plunder of natural resources and contamination of water), yet they discuss the issue from a markedly anthropocentric angle, pointing to the loss of benefits and comforts of living for the human population.⁵⁴ Interestingly, the topic of approaching eco-

50 Cohen and Duckert, "Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements," pp. 3–4.

51 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, p. 45.

52 "We are composed in 70 percent of water! Let us not forget about that," claims one of the texts used by the coursebooks in the chapter devoted to healthy living (JPBG, p. 106).

53 HPP2, pp. 108–112.

54 PMO, pp. 88–89.

logical crisis is argued in relation to the Biblical notion of the alleged human mastery of nature, or its misguided interpretation, while appealing to the readers' conscience. This clearly unsustainable relationship to the environment is however mentioned in only one book out of three under study—the remaining two appear to be content with the image of nature as agreeable surroundings serving human needs or as the object of patriotic sentiment. In contrast, the newer handbooks present the reader with the whole catalogue of environmental concerns, including biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, global warming, climate change, toxic spills in oceans and seas, melting of glaciers, flooding of islands and coasts, and the problem of the overreliance on fossil fuels.⁵⁵ Understandably, the discussion tends to be increasingly detailed and sophisticated at the higher levels of linguistic competence, reflecting the learners' growing capacity for expression in the foreign language. The authors of the books draw most of their linguistic material from the public discourse, setting the tasks of understanding and debating socially controversial issues. The question of water in many guises (as oceans, seas, rivers, ground waters, ice, rain) surfaces repeatedly in the chapters devoted to the environment, where it is most often shown as a defenceless and receptive ecosystem that falls prey to destructive human activity. However, the interpretation of the climate crisis seems to accentuate its possible future consequences for human communities (affecting the economies based on tourism) and not so much the burden it imposes on the global ecosystem.⁵⁶ The authors of the handbooks fail to trace the existing anthropogenic pressures back to their actual causes related to the functioning of the Western capitalist system, foregrounding instead commonplace slogans encouraging environmentally-friendly behaviour in individuals. Moreover, one of the texts proposed as the learning material seems to demonstrate a naïve belief that technological progress in the form of geoeengineering may help avert the catastrophe, enumerating the fancy ideas aimed at “cooling the Earth.”⁵⁷ In this way, a utilitarian attitude towards environmental factors becomes even more entrenched, reinforcing the purely anthropocentric perspective and the dualistic representations of inert nature manipulated at will by human civilization.

55 JPBG, pp. 53–60.

56 HPP2, p. 125.

57 JPBG, p. 61, 243.

5. Water in Polish rituals, customs and folk beliefs

The most promising reference to water as a precious natural resource and agential power can be found quite unexpectedly in the sections of coursebooks dealing with Polish folk customs and beliefs. Almost all of the books contain passages dedicated to Polish tradition and holidays commonly celebrated by the inhabitants of the country, though the units are variously named and categorized. It is worth noting, however, that in the earlier publications the aquatic motifs are much more elaborate and copious than in the later ones, which may perhaps be attributed to the gradual secularization of folk culture and the decline of some customs. The most frequent reference involving water is that of Wet Monday, the second day of Easter celebration, featuring the tradition of people throwing water over each other, which dates back to medieval or even pre-Christian times.⁵⁸ The custom was originally associated with the arrival of spring around the March equinox and was probably performed to ensure a successful harvest; however, in its modern version it is more about regular “water fights” between young boys and girls, foretelling their chances of good marriage (where being soaked or splashed with water equals being found attractive by the opposite sex). The role of water in this ritual cannot be overemphasised, as its abundance signifies not only the need for purification and regeneration at the onset of a new cycle of nature, but also the deep ambivalence of the aquatic element, bringing forth both the blessing of fertility and the threat of annihilation (through immersion and drowning). As in most Slavic folk beliefs, the engagement with the element is a symbolic re-enactment of the past confrontation with unpredictable powers of nature, as well as a mark of respect to what is perceived as a superior force, a form of intelligence that directs the course of events.⁵⁹ With that conception, we may be approaching the animist view of the elements as living, intentional and agential powers, endowed with performative functions and mediating between the spheres of the sacred and the profane.

Needless to say, the list of customs and folk beliefs mentioned in the coursebooks of the Polish language is much longer, encompassing also such interesting social phenomena as the drowning of Marzanna, a figure of the Slavic goddess symbolising winter, death and disease, or the hanging, burning and drowning of Judas effigy around Easter as a symbol of ridding the community of past evil (a ceremony involving the conjunction of two opposing elements, water and fire).

58 PMO, p. 176; JPBG, p. 24; HHP1, pp. 166–167.

59 Piotr Kowalski, *Woda żywa. Opowieść o wodzie, zdrowiu, higienie i dietetyce* (Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ossolineum, 2002), pp. 41–50. See also the ethnographical evidence from Poland's eastern regions, together with the bibliography, quoted on the website: <https://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/etnografia-lubelszczyzny-ludowe-wierzenia-o-wodzie> [accessed 13. 12. 2023].

The authors of the 2007 handbook, Agnieszka Madeja and Barbara Morcinek, have also decided to devote much space to divination, underlining the role of water in Polish fortune-telling customs such as the ones that take place on St Andrew's Day.⁶⁰ Divination sessions, still performed in Poland these days, typically involve melting wax and pouring it through a keyhole into a bowl of cold water, in order to obtain a hardened wax shape which is then interpreted as the prediction of a future relationship. These remnants of folk culture, if read against the claims of ecocriticism, may help us retrieve a pre-modern, less anthropocentrically-minded vision of nature that points to the deep entanglement of human beings with the primal elements of reality. As indicated by scholars in the field of Blue Humanities, it is worthwhile to study European folk and literary traditions in search for the sources that would both aid in generating ecological knowledge and help dismantle the modernist, technological approach to the forces of nature.⁶¹ This seems to be precisely the function of water references in the above mentioned passages. The mythical stories around water bodies and their share in "magical" transformations of matter give rise to a host of new meanings that may pave the way for a more relational and biocentric model of thinking. In the face of dangerous weather events, unleashed by the instability of the climate in the Anthropocene, such indigenous knowledge of human engagement with elemental materiality may facilitate the adaptation to new conditions and foster a deeper understanding of the ties binding human and non-human worlds.

Conclusion: Towards the Elemental Wisdom in Teaching

The present article argued for the possibility of applying an approach based on elemental ecocriticism to the field of foreign language instruction, analysing the contents of the handbooks in terms of their contribution to the environmental education in the Anthropocene. Its aim was to highlight the significance of elemental reading as a field that allows for the production of less anthropocentric knowledge models by pointing to the deep affinity of human beings with environmental forces and by enlarging the notion of agency to include other than human entities. Most of all, however, the author wished to make clear that foreign language learning, informed by the sympoietic ontologies of the Anthropocene, may provide space for the growth of a mature environmental engagement and

60 PMO, p. 49.

61 See Anna Barcz, "'A River Speaks': Translating Aquatic Voice and Re-Animation of Fluvial Monstrosities," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Poetica* (2023), vol. 11, p. 178, <https://doi.org/10.24917/23534583.11.10>.

acute awareness of climate crisis in students. The latter seems to reside on the recognition of empowerment of non-human nature, but first and foremost, on the learners' ability to read the environment for signals of agency, stemming from the habits of interpretation that are based on the non-dualistic perception of the universe.

Consequently, the role of education in the humanities needs to be reconceived to include the formation of new reading habits. In the age of climate emergency it is no longer possible to teach school subjects, including foreign languages, in the classical humanist mode, by simply acquainting the students with the learning material such as grammar rules or inculcating long lists of vocabulary. It makes no longer sense to teach about the rivers, lakes and seas as symbols of national identity or agreeable environments serving as the scenery for human entertainment and leisure. What is needed instead is a broad affective perspective taking into account both the human exploitation of the natural world and vulnerability to elemental pressures, especially the fact of human exposure to natural disasters aggravated by climate change. In this way, future handbooks should challenge the conventional representations of nature as a supply of material resources ready to be extracted and used for human purposes and opt for the acknowledgment of the deep kinship between human bodies and environmental actors. One way to do so is to rediscover and draw on the wisdom of existing mythical/indigenous traditions or bold literary imaginations that picture the world in a more relational and processual manner, foregrounding interactions and elemental "flows" between different assemblages of matter. Perhaps it is time to remap the world and view the surrounding environments, with its rivers, streams, mountains and forests, as response-able to our actions: as living, breathing, sentient and suffering.

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Abstract

The article is aimed at discussing whether an approach based on elemental ecocriticism, a new brand of environmental criticism which seeks to make humans aware of the significance of their intimate entanglement with the elements such as water, air, earth and fire, both inside the human body and in the outside world, can be implemented to analyze the contents of schoolbooks used for instruction in foreign (mostly Polish) language learning, and whether adopting such an approach in teaching may lead to a more acute awareness of the climate crisis in students. The starting point of the analysis is an attempt to read the presence of water (especially of freshwater bodies: rivers, lakes, canals and wells) in the depictions of various localities, both real and imaginary ones, such as urban and rural environments, that are utilized by authors of schoolbooks, but also in more unexpected thematic clusters where fresh water is mentioned only indirectly, for example in the presentation of folk customs, leisure activities or health concerns. The author argues that the usual manner of language instruction based on making the learner familiar with long lists of vocabulary items seen as relevant to the interests of a given human community should be reconsidered and possibly replaced by a broader perspective that takes into consideration both the human exploitation of the natural world and human vulnerability stemming from the dependence on the vicissitudes of the elements which are thus capable of revealing their agential powers. Challenging the conventional conceptualizations of water as either a mere ornament or passive container of polluted matter in the urban landscape, or otherwise a wild, untamed force to be brought under control and colonized, the article opts for the third way: recognizing the deep affinity of human beings with water environments as one dimension of elemental entanglement and reconstituting their kinship with freshwater bodies that may be traced to local / folk / mythical / indigenous traditions. So conceived, the 'return of the elements' is thus a way to both reorient foreign language teaching and learning towards a more ecocritical agenda, and to rediscover what seems to be an environmental and multi-species history underlying the construction of national identity in a given language.

Keywords: elements, elemental ecocriticism, foreign language teaching, environmental history, freshwater studies.

Polish Language Education from the Blue-Humanities Perspective: Thinking of the Vistula

Introduction

As extreme weather events have become ever more intense and frequent over the last dozen years, it is now a matter of utter urgency to alter humans' approach to their environment and broadly conceived natural resources. Many researchers believe that the school has an essential role to play in this process and that ecological education should be made an integral part of the curriculum across the levels of schooling.¹ This call also concerns foreign language classrooms, where the curricula, which are aligned with the guidelines of the Council of Europe on developing learners' general and language-related communication competencies, ever more often highlight the fostering of receptivity to environmental themes as part of language education. As a result, language education researchers increasingly undertake the study of the pro-environmental curricular content and of the ways this content is conveyed in foreign language textbooks for various groups of learners.² The choice of textbooks as a research corpus is important

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- 2 See, e.g., Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron, "Treści proekologiczne w glottodydaktyce polonistycznej na podstawie podręczników i badań ankietowych w perspektywie metodyki zadaniowej," *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2021, t. 28, nr 2, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2021.28.04; Alina Mitek-Dziemba, "Ekoglottodydaktyka? Analiza treści podręczników do nauki języka angielskiego jako obcego w świetle założeń krytyki ekologicznej," *Z Teorii i Praktyki Dydaktycznej Języka Polskiego* 2022, nr 31, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.31261/TPDJP.2022.31.01>; Ewa Półtorak, "Kształcenie postawy proekologicznej na lekcjach języka obcego w szkole ponadpodstawowej (na przykładzie materiałów do nauczania języka francuskiego jako drugiego/kolejnego języka obcego)," *Z Teorii i Praktyki Dydaktycznej Języka Polskiego* 2022, nr 31, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.31261/TPDJP.2022.31.03>.

insofar that the materials they contain are the basic and sometimes the only point of reference for learners as they encounter new language and culture.

In this paper, we discuss a project aimed to examine how the authors of textbooks of Polish as a foreign language (PFL) frame river ecosystems. Our interest in the ways the aquatic world is represented in language education materials is methodologically anchored in the blue humanities, also called the oceanic or new maritime humanities,³ an interdisciplinary research movement that has been robustly developing within the ecological or environmental humanities for more than a decade now.⁴ At the core of the blue humanities is the exploration of humans' cultural relationships with seas and oceans, combined with an "interest in non-human and more-than-human relations and freshwater ecosystems [...], which is powered by our increasing awareness of the climate crisis and the lack of access to drinking water."⁵ Taking this research perspective as our starting point, we analyzed the discourse on river ecosystems in the latest textbooks for children and young-adult learners of Polish in Ukraine, Germany, and the UK, with a special focus on the narrative about the Vistula, Poland's longest river. By adopting this approach, we could engage in in-depth reflection on the culture-formative potential of the Vistula, which has been investigated in selected literary texts,⁶ research publications, and cultural productions⁷ so far. As a result, we offer implications for solutions that might practically contribute to forming PFL learners' more realistic ideas about the Vistula, which is often called the queen of Poland's rivers. As underscored by Jerzy Bartmiński, "[t]he semantic potential of the Vistula is inexhaustible," but "[i]ts deepest meaning lies in [its] vision as [...] a huge flowing body of water, a river."⁸

3 Ewelina Jarosz, "Błękitna humanistyka: kultura, sztuka, kultura i wspólnota," *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 2021, nr 2 (48), pp. vii–xiv, <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843860pk.21.015.14072>.

4 Ewa Domańska, "Humanistyka ekologiczna," *Teksty Drugie* 2013, nr 1–2, pp. 13–32.

5 Jarosz, "Błękitna humanistyka," p. viii.

6 See, e.g., Anna Barcz, Monika Gromala, and Paulina Waclawik, "Wisła akwakrytyczna: głębokie mapowanie źródeł literackich w perspektywie nowej historiografii powodzi (1934)," *Teksty Drugie* 2022, nr 4, pp. 12–31, <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2022.4.2>.

7 Jerzy Bartmiński, "Językowo-kulturowy obraz rzeki Wisły," in *Językowe i kulturowe modelowanie świata. Księga dedykowana Profesorowi Karolowi Danielowi Kadłubcowi*, eds. Katarzyna Marcol and Jan Kajfosz (Czeski Cieszyn, Katowice, and Ostrawa: Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej, Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach, and Wydział Filozoficzny Uniwersytetu Ostrawskiego, 2017), pp. 39–55.

8 Bartmiński, "Językowo-kulturowy obraz rzeki Wisły," p. 53.

The Vistula in Polish culture and landscape

According to Krystyna Rembowska,⁹ cultural geographic space is made of types of buildings, names of places, forms of settlement, regimes of land use, and dialects; and cultural geography shows the ways in which a given group of people perceives the nature and place of its existence. National identities are fashioned in literary texts and other cultural productions, including songs, films, paintings, and, above all, language, which is intimately connected to the life and everyday realities of its users. By examining those, we can capture the role of the Vistula in the life and culture of Poles. The literature on the Vistula is opulent, and it comprises not only potamological studies. Most of these publications are popular-science texts that survey the history of the Vistula in the hydrological context and beyond, looking into its economic, social, and cultural facets. Like many other rivers in Europe and the world, the Vistula has been generative of cities. A number of economy-boosting castles and towns were erected on its banks, and its presence impacted—and still does impact—the lifestyle of populations in the area. There were historical stints when the Vistula had a paramount role to play; for example, in the 15th and 16th centuries, it was the main avenue for the shipment of Polish grain to Western Europe as a conveniently navigable inland waterway. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Vistula came under the administration of the three partitioning states,¹⁰ which was not indifferent to its economic development and deployment; and after Poland regained sovereign statehood in 1918, the symbolic meaning of the Vistula was even more enhanced as the mother-river and the keystone of Polishness. Even though the whole of the Vistula only found itself within the Polish borders in the aftermath of the Second World War, it had been pictured as an inherently Polish river in the minds of Poles long before that. It had been regarded, so to speak, as mirroring the Polish national features and symbolizing Polish people's attachment to their motherland.¹¹ The Vistula has often been personified in arts and literature. Predom-

9 Krystyna Rembowska, "Kultura w badaniach geograficznych," in *Kultura jako przedmiot badań geograficznych*, ed. Elżbieta Orłowska (Wrocław: Oddział Wrocławski Polskiego Towarzystwa Geograficznego, 2002), pp. 9–11.

10 In the late 18th century, the Polish state was dismantled by its three neighbors—Prussia, Russia, and Austria—in a series of three divisions, which are customarily referred to in Polish historiography as the three partitions of Poland. Poland's lands were reunified, and the country regained political independence in 1918. (translator's note)

11 In an interview in the weekly *Polityka*, Andrzej Chwalba quotes Karol Zbyszewski as listing the salient features of the Vistula that reflect the temperament of Poles: changeability, inconsistency, hysteria, melancholy, charm, unpredictability, and the lack of steadiness. See Agnieszka Krzemińska, "Wisła: kobieca, dzika, niesforna. Jako obywatel apeluję: zostawmy ją taką, jaka jest," an interview with Andrzej Chwalba, *Polityka*, July 5–11, 2023, nr 28 (3421), p. 67.

inantly, the river has been imaged, pictorially and verbally alike, as a woman and a mother. As a woman, it became a symbol of beauty, and as a mother, a symbol of birth and life. Andrzej Chwalba¹² begins his ponderings on the Vistula in *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* [*The Vistula: A Biography of the River*] with a chapter titled “Wisła jest kobietą” [“The Vistula is a woman”], where he discusses the representations of the river in the products of human culture.¹³ Ludwik Kauffmann’s sculpture of 1855 is one of the most familiar personifications of the Vistula; its recognizability results from its heightened presence in public space as it is located in front of the Palace on the Isle in the Royal Baths Park, Warsaw’s iconic sight. The sculpture presents the Vistula as a half-nude woman who leans on an oar, with a boy holding a sheaf of corn standing next to her.¹⁴ This is a reference to the trading past of the river as a grain transport route. In 1878, the eminent Polish artist Antoni Kurzawa made an allegorical sculpture of the Wawel¹⁵ and the Vistula, which is preserved at the Castle Museum in Sandomierz today. In this rendering, the Wawel is an old man and the Vistula is a young woman sitting at his feet, an oar in her hand, her long braids cascading onto the ground. The youth, beauty, and vitality of the Vistula were supposed to symbolize hopes for the revival of partitioned Poland. Multiple sculptures devoted to the Vistula followed; among them, those situated in Wisła, a town in Tscheschen Silesia which is the river’s namesake, are perhaps the most noteworthy ones. The Springs of the Vistula monument, which can be seen there today, was preceded by two other sculptures. The first of them showed the river as a female figure in bronze that connected all the lands of Poland from the mountains down to the sea. As it was expressive of a deeply patriotic message, the statue was destroyed by the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. In the 1970s, another memorial—popularly referred to as *Wiślanka*—was put in its place, again presenting a female figure, though this time it was a Silesian woman dressed in a folk costume and holding flowers in her hand. Today’s sculpture of the Springs of the Vistula is inspired by its 1970s predecessor.

The Vistula is called the queen of Polish rivers because it is the longest river whose watercourse is entirely comprised within the Polish borders (from its springs on the slopes of the Barania Góra in the Silesian Beskid Mountains in the

12 Andrzej Chwalba, *Wisła. Biografia rzeki* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2023).

13 The Vistula is a protagonist of many Polish cultural productions and is likewise inscribed in Poles’ linguistic world picture (e. g., a battle of 1920 is called the miracle on the Vistula; *Wisła Kraków* [Vistula Cracow] is the name of a popular football club; and Poland is referred to as a country on the Vistula). Given the size constraints on this text, we only mention the anthropomorphizations of the Vistula in monuments, while retaining the analysis of literary texts for a separate paper.

14 Stanisław Gierszewski, *Wisła w dziejach Polski* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1982).

15 The Wawel, one of Poland’s most significant cultural sites, is a historical royal castle atop a likewise named hill in Cracow, which was once Poland’s capital. (translator’s note)

south of Poland to its mouth entering the Baltic Sea). Most of the tributary rivers that cross Poland's territory, precisely speaking as many as twenty-seven of them, join the Vistula:

Naturally, the Vistula is the queen of Polish rivers; this river is Poland's beating heart, untamed still, with its waters flowing broadly, once sparkling in the sun, once dark and infested with whirlpools in the depths of its meandering currents. Beautiful and ominous, cheerful and menacing and terrifying, a bread-giver to the throngs of sand-diggers mining sand from its bottom and raftsmen floating huge tree trunks and merchandise along it. Feeding those who have fished in its waters over centuries.¹⁶

The beginnings of inland sail navigation in Poland go back to the 16th century, and its end was heralded by the advent of the steam engine in the 19th century. The historian Honorata Obuchowska-Pysiowa¹⁷ argues that, in the first half of the 17th century, the Vistula navigation was the second most frequent source of Poles' livelihoods, only preceded by agriculture. As an occupational group that transported merchandise by floating it down the river, raftsmen developed their own unique culture and became the stuff of legend. On the one hand, raftsmen's work was difficult, carried remarkable responsibility, and involved a high risk of illness from toiling in bad weather. On the other, raftsmen enjoyed considerable freedom in their trade and were known to like singing and carousing in riverbank inns, gaining notoriety for their impudence, quarrelsomeness, and churlishness. Skilled raftsmen manifested their cultural distinctiveness and prided themselves on being "the people of the river," while writers admired "raftsmen's love of their work and of the river, their attachment to freedom, responsibility for others, and solidarity with those in need. They idealized raftsmen as an embodiment of identification with Polish culture, while failing to perceive the darker side of raftsmen's life."¹⁸

In the 19th century, the Vistula flowed across the three parts of partitioned Poland, each of them governed by a different political system, which did not make raftsmen's work any easier. The river was perennially a site of encounters—of cultures, of languages, and of religions. To be able to ply their trade, the people of the river had to speak several languages and be able to navigate different political systems. In Toruń, Grudziądz, and Bydgoszcz, three cities on the Vistula, there are raftsmen statues, which commemorate the connection of the urban hubs with the Vistula and celebrate the important role that raftsmen played not only in the economy, but also in the culture of Poland.

16 Tadeusz Władysław Świątek and Rafał Chwiszczuk, *Królowa Wisła* (Warszawa: Fundacja Cultus, 2012), p. 6.

17 Honorata Obuchowska-Pysiowa, *Handel wiślany w pierwszej połowie XVII wieku* (Wrocław, Warszawa, and Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1964).

18 Chwalba, *Wisła*, p. 169.

Despite Poles' mental bond with the Vistula, there is ample evidence that, over years, they have forgotten that the Vistula co-creates urban organisms,¹⁹ that it is not aside or nearby, but at the very center, or at least it should be there, and that it must be taken care of if its condition mirrors the condition of Polishness and emblemizes it: "Not to be surrounded by litter, [people] threw or poured all waste and nightsoil straight into the river, forgetting that they took their drinking water from it! With time, this came to cause serious sanitary issues."²⁰ The Vistula was morphing into an incidental protagonist, bound to the fulfilment of human needs, such as festivity. Such practices are discussed by Tadeusz Władysław Świątek and Rafał Chwyszczuk, who cite a passage from issue 27 of the daily *Stolica*, dated to 5 July 1959:

There is but one day, or rather one night, in the year when almost all the residents of Warsaw remember that there is the Vistula in their city. The feast of wreaths²¹ is this night, when thousands of people gather on both sides of the river.²²

In the collective consciousness of Poles, rivers are predominantly associated with natural beauty, wildness, and relaxation. When presented in this way, rivers become heavily idealized and are converted into symbols, wrenched from their interwovenness with urban spaces, an object of dispute, a venue of rest, a workplace and, also, a site of ecological abuse.

Joanna Angiel's research in her *Rzeka Wisła, jej wartości i percepcja. Wisła w edukacji geograficznej* [*The Vistula River, Its Values, and Perceptions: The Vistula in Geographical Education*]²³ offers insights into the representations of the Vistula, which she collected from surveys administered to young adults in eleven towns and cities situated along the Vistula. Her study yields a very diversified image of the Vistula, which results from the respondents' personal experiences and their (sometimes stereotypical) knowledge, mostly acquired in geography classrooms or developed from observation. The students perceive the river in the city as dangerous, which is linked to acts of vandalism, instances of drowning, and floods. The river is a landmark of the area as an important feature in the city maps and a place of leisure, recreational pastimes, and tourist practices. The

19 In the literature on the Vistula development, Stefan Starzyński stands out as the first mayor of Warsaw to realize "that the city must turn face-up to the Vistula, which is a treasure and a mirror for the capital of the 2nd Republic. He was committed to making the capital with its population of one million bind its life to the Vistula, a fast-flowing, powerful river, wild and yet unregulated at the time." Świątek and Chwyszczuk, *Królowa Wisła*, p. 147.

20 Świątek and Chwyszczuk, *Królowa Wisła*, p. 146.

21 The feast of wreaths is a popular name of the midsummer night's celebrations, which involve making garlands and putting them afloat on the river. (translator's note)

22 Świątek and Chwyszczuk, *Królowa Wisła*, p. 146.

23 Joanna Angiel, *Rzeka Wisła, jej wartości i percepcja. Wisła w edukacji geograficznej* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski and Wydział Geografii i Studiów Regionalnych, 2011).

Vistula connects and divides: it connects many Polish cities and divides them athwart, causing challenges to traffic (communication incapacity, bridge construction, etc.). In aesthetic terms, the Vistula is assessed as beautiful, common, and ugly in nearly equal proportions.

Angiel has also analyzed geography textbooks for their Vistula-related content (including axiological content) to conclude that most of the information they supply is hydrological and geomorphological. At the same time, the “natural, aesthetic and social qualities of the national river are generally left unpresented in the textbooks altogether or, at best, are mentioned sporadically.”²⁴ Angiel’s research indicates that “the *cultural facet* of the Vistula, expressed for example in its cultural role in the history of Poland, the region, and/or the city was a sparsely recognized part of the image of the river.”²⁵ Angiel proposes relinquishing the stilted image of the Vistula as predominantly a symbolic entity and replacing it with the experience of the Vistula in order to enable young people to relate to the river more deeply and to buttress their emotional bond with it. In her view, multidimensional Vistula education should contribute to fostering affective attitudes to the river and influence the manner in which people (Poles and not only them) treat and behave vis-à-vis the river,²⁶ so that they appreciate the goods associated with it.

Angiel’s research indicates that Polish students living in Poland have no in-depth knowledge of the Vistula and, instead, uphold a range of prevalent representations of it. Given this, the image of the Vistula in educational materials for learners from outside Polish language and culture is an interesting field of research.

The Vistula in PFL textbooks: Research findings

Our research project aimed to examine the ways in which aquatic motifs were presented in language education materials, with a special focus on the narratives about the Vistula. The sample we studied included the most recent Polish-as-a-foreign-language textbooks, underpinned by the state-of-the-art language-education concepts promoted, for example, by the authors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.²⁷

24 Angiel, *Rzeka Wisła*, p. 306.

25 Angiel, *Rzeka Wisła*, p. 309.

26 Angiel, *Rzeka Wisła*, p. 306.

27 Council of Europe, *Europejski system opisu kształcenia językowego: uczenie się, nauczanie, ocenianie*, trans. Waldemar Martyniuk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Centralnego Ośrodka Doskonalenia Nauczycieli, 2003).

In total, we took into account ten textbooks available on the Polish publishing market.²⁸ We primarily focused on the resources developed for children and young adults learning Polish in Ukraine, Germany, and the UK. Our choice of this age group resulted from our interest in the modes of narratives about the Vistula proposed in the textbooks and their potential effect on the fostering of young language users' attitudes to the queen of Polish rivers.

To establish that, we relied on qualitative research techniques,²⁹ in particular on a meticulous analysis of excerpts from the teaching materials. Our analysis was supported by a purpose-designed research tool: a special chart we developed to bring together the aquatic content comprised in our textbook corpus. First, we examined how the hydronym “the Vistula” functioned in textbook discourse. To this end, we studied all the source texts and scrutinized the didactic paraphernalia. We explored the study materials used and the types of tasks and assignments employed in introducing the hydronym into lesson units. Insights into the values attributed to the Vistula in the textbooks were gleaned from the data we had collected and analyzed in this way.

Importantly, the Vistula is one of the basic bodies of water included in the thematic catalogues which are used to concretize the curricular content in PFL teaching. The catalogue of sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, and life-and-institutions issues for the “Polish realities” category developed by the authors of *Programy nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego. Poziomy A1–C2* [*Curricula for Polish as a Foreign Language: Levels A1–C2*]³⁰ includes the major state and national symbols and elementary geographic information for the lowest A level, with issues related to the sea, rivers, and lakes recommended to be introduced from level B1 onward. These general guidelines are fleshed out in *Kultura w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego. Stan obecny, programy nauczania, pomoce dydaktyczne* [*Culture in Teaching Polish as a Foreign Language: The Present Status, Curricula, Teaching Aids*],³¹ where the authors of the culture-related thematic and functional-conceptual inventory propose “landscape” as a thematic

28 The sample of textbooks we analyzed included: 1) *Język polski bez granic*; 2) *Od dzwonka do dzwonka. Podręcznik do nauczania języka polskiego nastolatków w Wielkiej Brytanii*; 3) *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz Ty! Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla dzieci na Ukrainie* (vols. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5); 4) *Zanim zadzwoni dzwonek. Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla uczniów polonijnych w Wielkiej Brytanii w klasach V i VI*; and 5) *Z innej bajki. Podręcznik do nauczania języka polskiego dla dzieci w Niemczech* (vols. 1 and 2). The complete bibliographic data are provided in the References.

29 Weronika Wilczyńska and Anna Michońska-Stadnik, *Metodologia badań w glottodydaktyce. Wprowadzenie* (Kraków: Avalon, 2010).

30 Iwona Janowska et al., eds., *Programy nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego. Poziomy A1–C2* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2011).

31 Władysław T. Miodunka, ed., *Kultura w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego. Stan obecny, programy nauczania, pomoce dydaktyczne* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

sub-category encompassing a range of hydronyms, such as *Morze Bałtyckie* (the Baltic Sea), *Wisła* (the Vistula), *Odra* (the Oder), *Jeziora Mazurskie* (Mazuria Lakes), *Gopło* (Lake Gopło), *Morskie Oko* (the largest lake in the Tatras) and the name of “the main river of the region in which Polish instruction takes place.”³² Another contribution to the same volume features the hydronym “the Vistula” as a component of the phrase *cud nad Wisłą* (the miracle on the Vistula) in the “myths-and-symbols” category included in an index of entries to a small lexicon of Polish culture.³³ These curricula and recommendations corroborate the notion that the tourist/sightseeing dimension is part of the cultural context as a natural environment of language. In thematic inventories, rivers are incorporated into the category of Poland’s geography and landscape,³⁴ and PFL learners are supposed to be taught the names of the biggest Polish rivers and other water reservoirs. These guidelines imply the inclusion of hydronyms in textbooks when geographic information about Poland is introduced. In this way, the geographic cultural space of language users (a human community in a given area) is constructed.³⁵ In our textbook corpus, the Vistula is the most frequently featured Polish river. In fact, it is the only river system that is included in each of the textbooks we studied.³⁶ The frequency criterion indicates that the hydronym “the Vistula” appears more often at higher levels of language proficiency. Yet what matters to us more in the context of our research is how the hydronym is actually used and what functions it fulfils, all of which adds up the image of the Vistula encountered by learners of Polish as a foreign language.

On multiple occasions, the Vistula river system appears in circumstances typical, in particular, of lower proficiency levels, where it has predominantly, if not exclusively, an instrumental role. The Vistula is cited in short, isolated sen-

32 Anna Burzyńska-Kamieniecka and Urszula Dobesz, “Inwentarz tematyczny i funkcjonalno-pojęciowy do nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego w aspekcie kulturowym,” in Miodunka, *Kultura w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego*, p. 126.

33 Grażyna Zarzycka and Mirosław Jelonkiewicz, “Indeks haseł do *Małego leksykonu kultury polskiej dla cudzoziemców*,” in Miodunka, *Kultura w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego*, pp. 161–170.

34 The guidelines of the Council of Europe for language education explicitly insist that life-and-institutions and socio-cultural content should be used in teaching languages; Council of Europe, *Europejski system*.

35 Notably, two Polish culture compendia for foreigners include entries related to the Vistula: 1) “cud nad Wisłą” (the miracle on the Vistula) and 2) “Wisła” (the Vistula) and “Wisła, akcja” (Operation Vistula). See, respectively, Romuald Cudak and Jolanta Tambor, eds., *Kultura polska. Silva rerum* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo “Śląsk” and Szkoła Języka i Kultury Polskiej Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2002), and Oscar E. Swan, *Kaleidoscope of Poland: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (Kraków: Prolog Publishing, 2015).

36 Besides the Vistula, the Baltic Sea is the only body of water whose name appears in our textbook corpus. The other river names recommended by the authors of thematic catalogues for PFL instruction are far less regularly encountered in the textbooks.

tences in which, for example, missing syntactic elements are to be filled in,³⁷ or which illustrate grammar explanations.³⁸ In such contexts, the Vistula is simply an item of auxiliary language material for automatizing lexical and grammatical structures.

At the same time, however, our textbook corpus includes passages that encourage making sense of the Vistula as taking more of a subject-position. This is exemplified by the following excerpt:

The residents of Warsaw often spend warm evenings on the banks of the Vistula. They go strolling there and relax with their families. In the summer, there are a lot of venues and food trucks, that is, vehicles in which food is cooked and sold, along the Vistula boulevards.³⁹

Such depictions may promote interpreting the image of the Vistula through the lens of its fundamental function as a living body of water.

However, our detailed examination of the educational materials indicates that their content is pervaded by an anthropocentric point of view and foregrounds the functions attributed to rivers in urban spaces, equating them with leisure venues for people. This is the dominant tendency in our corpus, where the Vistula is primarily pictured as a meeting point and a place of recreation and holiday pastimes, which is at the same time an important commercial and service site.⁴⁰ It is also presented as a destination of tourist trips⁴¹ and a venue of cyclical cultural events.⁴² On rarer occasions, the Vistula is cited as an arena of sporting exploits⁴³

37 For example: “*Najdłuższa Polski nazywa się Wisła*” (“The longest of Poland is called the Vistula”); Katarzyna Kołak et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty! Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla dzieci na Ukrainie. Tom 1* (Warszawa: Fundacja “Wolność i Demokracja” and Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2015), p. 36.

38 For example: “*W języku polskim wielką literą piszemy nazwy geograficzne, tzn. nazwy krajów [...], rzek (Wisła, Tamiza)*” (“In Polish, we capitalize geographical names, that is, the names of countries [...], rivers [the Vistula, the Thames]”); Aleksandra Święcka et al., *Od dzwonka do dzwonka. Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla nastolatków w Wielkiej Brytanii* (Warszawa and Londyn: Fundacja “Towarzystwo Projektów Edukacyjnych,” 2020), p. 16.

39 Agnieszka Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty! Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla dzieci na Ukrainie. Tom 3* (Warszawa: Fundacja “Wolność i Demokracja” and Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2016), pp. 28–29.

40 For example: “*Przez cały rok można zjeść coś nad Wisłą*” (“You can have a snack by the Vistula all year round”); Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty!... Tom 3*, p. 30.

41 For example: “*Dla tych, którzy chcieliby podziwiać Warszawę, płynąc Wisłą, Warszawskie Linie Turystyczne przygotowały swoją letnią1*” (“The Warsaw Tourist Lines has prepared its summer1 for those who would like to admire Warsaw from the Vistula”); Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty! Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla dzieci na Ukrainie. Tom 5* (Warszawa: Fundacja “Wolność i Demokracja” and Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2018), p. 168.

42 For example: “*W przystani przy Bulwarze Karskiego, z okazji obchodów Roku Rzeki Wisły, odbędzie się cały szereg wodnych atrakcji, m.in.: rejsy, wyścigi wioślarzy na tradycyjnych łodziach typu hamburka, pokazy jazdy na nartach wodnych i wakeboardzie*” (“As part of the

or a background of folk rituals.⁴⁴ The centrality of the anthropocentric perspective in the teaching materials is supplemented with isolated passages that highlight the patriotic symbolism associated with the Vistula in the minds of Poles.⁴⁵ The river is referred to as a factor in city-formation merely in a handful of texts, where it is mentioned along with other information on the topography of selected Polish cities.⁴⁶ The references that speak to a less anthropocentric narrative about the Vistula are few and far between. They hardly represent a bio-centric, let alone an aqua-centric, approach,⁴⁷ because such passages in no way show the Vistula as a living river system and practically do not present its inherent features at all. One exception is a line in the depiction of Warsaw, where the Vistula is described as “a wildly flowing river crossing the city.”⁴⁸ It is in fact

Year of the Vistula River celebrations, the Karski Boulevard pier will host a number of water events, such as cruises, rowing races in traditional *hamburka* boats, and water-skiing and wakeboarding shows”); Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty! Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla dzieci na Ukrainie. Tom 4* (Warszawa: Fundacja “Wolność i Demokracja” and Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2017), p. 180.

- 43 For example: “Kolumb potrzebował trzech żaglowców, by dotrzeć do Ameryki. Aleksandrowi Dobie z Polic pod Szczecinem wystarczyło do tego kajak i własne mięśnie. W ciągu siedmiu lat pokonał Ocean Atlantycki aż trzy razy. Ostatni raz tuż przed swoimi 71. urodzinami. Nie ma chyba na świecie bardziej ekstremalnego dziadka niż Olek. [...] Jako pierwszy kajakarz przepłynął całą Wisłę” (“Columbus needed three sailing ships to reach America. Aleksander Doba of Police near Szczecin only needed a kayak and his own muscles. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean as many as three times in seven years. The last time was just before he turned seventy-one. Olek was probably the most extreme grandpa ever. [...] He was the first kayaker to navigate the entire Vistula”); Świącka et al., *Od dzwonka do dzwonka*, p. 181.
- 44 For example: “Już wczesnym popołudniem rozpoczną się sobótkowe obrzędy, plectenie wianków małych, dużych i największego – Warszawskiego Wianka Świętojańskiego, który wieczorem zostanie zwodowany na Wisłę” (“The midsummer night’s celebrations will begin early in the afternoon; wreaths will be woven—small ones, big ones, and the biggest of them all: the Warsaw St. John Wreath to be sent afloat on the Vistula in the evening”); Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty!... Tom 4*, p. 180.
- 45 For example: . “[O]ni mówią tak świetnie po polsku, że nigdy byś się nie domyślił, że nie urodzili się w kraju nad Wisłą.” (“[T]hey speak Polish so perfectly that you would never have guessed they were not born in the country on the Vistula!”); Katarzyna Kołak-Danyi, Agata Stencka-O’Neill, and Tomasz Wegner, *Zanim zadzwoni dzwonek. Podręcznik do nauki języka polskiego dla uczniów polonijnych w Wielkiej Brytanii w klasach V i VI* (Warszawa and London: Fundacja “Towarzystwo Projektów Edukacyjnych,” 2020), p. 109.
- 46 For example: “Warszawa to stolica Polski i województwa mazowieckiego, największe miasto kraju, położone w jego środkowo-wschodniej części, na Nizinie Środkowomazowieckiej na Mazowszu, nad Wisłą” (“Warsaw is the capital and the largest city of Poland and the Mazovia Voivodship; it is situated on the Vistula in the Central Mazovian Lowland in Mazovia, in the east-central part of the country”); Świącka et al., *Od dzwonka do dzwonka*, p. 15.
- 47 Barcz, Gromala, and Waclawik, “Wisła akwakrytyczna.”
- 48 Jastrzębska et al., *Raz, dwa, trzy i po polsku mówisz ty!... Tom 5*, p. 169.

also the only phrase in which the river is portrayed as an agent and, grammatically speaking, is the subject of the verb that conveys its activity.⁴⁹

Noticeably, the content on the Vistula that PFL learners obtain is transmitted via didacticized and exclusively monomodal resources (written texts alone). Although the river is talked about, it is visually represented merely by vector graphics (representing river or sea waves), without any photographs to show it in its natural surroundings. Besides, this content appears in routine teaching situations, and the hydronym “the Vistula” is largely introduced in grammar exercises and in sentences for practicing receptive skills. In the latter, references to the Vistula are usually included in sentences that test reading comprehension, as a result of which the inevitably mediated contact with the river is passive as well.

To conclude, our survey suggests that the image of the Vistula produced by the textbooks we analyzed is one of a river that is, so to speak, dead and ancillary to human needs. The rare non-anthropocentric references are used to convey general geographic information, rather than saying anything about the river itself. Although the river is indeed present in the educational materials the textbooks provide, it is framed as an object, and the Vistula is turned into an abstraction and a cultural vignette with fixed values recognizable to common Poles.⁵⁰ This is consistent with the findings of Piotr Garncarek,⁵¹ who points out that we take certain phenomena for granted, treat them as “our own,” and consequently fail to foreground them in any special way that might facilitate their reception in settings of dialogue with and teaching Polish to foreigners.⁵²

Experiencing the Vistula: Implications for practice

This situation breeds a couple of pressing questions. How should the Vistula be presented in textbooks for foreign learners of Polish to enhance their engagement? How should foreigners be told of Poles’ attachment to the Vistula for the river to come across as a living organism that creates geographic cultural space

49 Our analysis of the most frequent collocations of the hydronym “the Vistula” indicates that, in our textbook corpus, *the Vistula* is mostly combined with the verb *to flow*, but the passage quoted above is the only textual locus where the river is the grammatical subject and gains, or rather re-gains, its natural movement.

50 The tendency in Polish language education to shift from the production of a cultural image of the world to the presentation of cultural vignettes is extensively discussed by Piotr Garncarek; see Piotr Garncarek, *Przestrzeń kulturowa w nauczaniu języka polskiego jako obcego* (Warszawa: Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2006).

51 Garncarek, *Przestrzeń kulturowa*; Piotr Garncarek, *Polonistyczna glottodydaktyka kulturowa – interdyscyplinarność i modele przestrzenne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022).

52 Garncarek, *Przestrzeń kulturowa*, p. 67.

rather than as a mere emblem? Below, we propose some possible solution which, in a narrower perspective, might help deconstruct the traditional narratives about the Vistula and, in a broader perspective, might practically respond to the needs of blue language education.⁵³

One viable solution would be to read texts in an active fashion in conjunction with enhanced engagement through action and impact on learners' emotions.⁵⁴ The texts currently used in textbooks for foreigners (such as those quoted above) usually revolve around receptive skills. As a rule, they cite facts and data, but include barely any trivia or broader context, which could encourage further reading and spark curiosity in aquatic themes. Instead of only being treated as a symbol of Poland, the Vistula should be shown as a vibrant organism that is the living and working environment of humans (the urban-genic role), supplies food and livelihoods, and is a protagonist of various cultural productions (legends, songs, poems, and the like—still resonant texts handed down from generation to generation). The focus should be shifted from the transmission of information on the Vistula in Polish instruction onto the sharing of the experiences of the two parties involved in the teaching/learning process. It would make every sense to move away from very general statements most frequently recurring in textbooks and, instead, begin to evoke everyday life with the matters that Poles find challenging and that are addressed in the media coverage, such as citizen campaigns for the Vistula.⁵⁵ Critical ecological pedagogy⁵⁶ can be proposed instead of preservation-centered environmental protection. The Vistula should be presented as an object of multifarious human pursuits, a river deeply entrenched in the consciousness of Poles, and a river possessed of agency, for example, in its shipping capacity (raftsmen's culture) and in its destructive floodings (as, for example, in 1934).

At the same time, the Vistula could also be more frequently addressed in multimodal texts,⁵⁷ using various semantically, structurally, and functionally interconnected sign systems to produce a message coherent in content and form. In the most rudimentary way, the textual content could be furnished with visual

53 Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron and Ewa Półtorak, *Obecność motywów akwaticznych na lekcjach języka obcego – w stronę błękitnej glottodydaktyki* (forthcoming).

54 On literature in action, see Andrzej Zieniewicz, "Nauczanie kultury i pragnienie opowieści," in *Literackie obrazy kultury. Perspektywa glottodydaktyczna*, ed. Justyna Zych (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020), pp. 15–28.

55 A wealth of teaching materials and information on what people do to save of the river ecosystem is available at <http://www.ratujmyrzeki.pl/263-remont-ktory-zabije-zycie-w-wisle> [accessed 21. 11. 2023].

56 Mitek-Dziemba, "Ekoglottodydaktyka."

57 Magdalena Makowska, "Tekst multimodalny w glottodydaktyce," *Neofilolog* 2018, nr 50/2, pp. 215–230, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14746/n.2018.50.2.4>.

elements, such as more or less evocative images (for example, photographs) of the river in its natural surroundings. Such materials could more naturally contribute to the formation of the image of the river in the learners' minds and, at the same time, help them experience the river in a more immediate fashion, especially when their chances of seeing it in person are limited. The presentation of the river in its natural environment could also be augmented with audio effects reproducing its natural noises. To this purpose, one could avail oneself of so-called soundscapes, the recordings of the river's underwater noises, which are produced, among others, by the Nobiscum Foundation as part of its project *Singing with noise. The sound map of the Vistula in the Mazovia region*.⁵⁸

Besides, depending on the learning setting, teachers could make up for the deficit of nature in classroom by offering outdoor education, which involves “an organized process of learning through personal experience and experimentation”⁵⁹ both within the formal education framework and, which has so far been more frequent, as part of informal education. Experiencing the Vistula together in its natural environment could be incorporated into interdisciplinary projects, implemented by individual schools or collaboratively by several schools, with one possible tangible outcome being acoustic maps charted by learners themselves on the basis of the sounds heard on the Vistula banks.

Outdoor education can be interestingly complemented in language classrooms by fieldwork “without the field,” proposed by Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek as “the practice of abandoning text-centrism for embodiment and concretization of details relevant to readers.”⁶⁰ In applying such solutions, teachers could organize coursework on the Vistula around creative experiences of the river by, for example, inviting learners to plan virtual trips to the cities located along the Vistula or to produce films or podcasts inspired by their own interpretations of tales and legends they learned about in previous lessons (such as those about Wars and Sawa, the Wawel Dragon, and Wanda who refused to marry a German). Such assignments would add interactive and mediative activities to the teachers' repertory of language practice exercises. Introducing those in foreign language classrooms is interesting insofar that they are pivotal to the task-based approach promoted by the Council of Europe, where “meanings/concepts are produced through interaction and permanent interplay of social and individual dimensions of the learning process. Mediation combines [...] the individual aspect

58 The relevant information and materials are available on the Foundation's website at <https://fundacjanobiscum.eu/mapadzwiekowawisly> [accessed 21. 11. 2023].

59 Joanna Godawa, *Zielona inkluzja, czyli o relacji człowieka z przyrodą, outdoor education i leśnej bajce* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2021), p. 9.

60 Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, “Jak być ze świata? Zwrot geologiczny i polonistyka/humanistyka terenowa w szkole,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2023, t. 31, nr 1, p. 6, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2023.31.03.

and the social aspect, with action resulting from the mediation of mental processes activated in performing a complex task.⁶¹ Mediation assignments characteristically focus not so much on language users themselves (their needs, feelings, or styles of communicating their communicative intentions) as on the ways in which learners share information they have acquired with other participants, adjusting their behavior to the communicational context. To accomplish this, the learners must possess not only language skills but also sufficiently developed emotional competence, which is indispensable to sustain a receptive and empathetic attitude to the themes addressed and the needs of other interaction participants. As a result, mediation assignments could help sensitize the learners' to the environment around them, including river ecosystems.

Conclusion

Unlike English and French, Polish is a regional language, and it still needs to be promoted in conjunction with the study of Poland, without ethnocentric leanings where one's culture is touted as superior, but rather in the multicultural spirit combined with a Polonophilic attitude.⁶² This approach is implemented in promoting the Vistula river, as indicated by our analysis of selected PFL textbooks. Grażyna Zarzycka makes an ardent case for "transforming language instruction into a series of events in which the participants will have an opportunity for authentic experience and individual development."⁶³ Her call would be heeded by revising Polish textbooks through including the content intimately related to the Vistula space, along with exercises that stimulate learners in language classrooms so as to make their experiences authentic and at the same time to augment their knowledge of the role the river plays not only as a symbol or a servant to humans, but also as part of the biosystem that fosters urban organisms and is integrally inscribed in human life.

A remodeling of the anthropocentric way in which we think of rivers and present them in textbooks may channel a reflective foreign-language education correlated with, rather than severed from, reality. The changes in the narrative about the Vistula we propose in this paper may be an impulse for expanding this perspective onto the role of rivers in the nations of the learners of Polish as a

61 Iwona Janowska, "Mediacja i działania mediacyjne w dydaktyce języków obcych," *Języki Obce w Szkole* 2017, nr 3, p. 80.

62 Grażyna Zarzycka, "Etnocentryzm, polonocentryzm, wielokulturowość, wielogłosowość... – opis orientacji obecnych w nauczaniu języków obcych," in *Polonistyka na świecie. Nauczanie języka i kultury polskiej studentów zaawansowanych*, ed. Jan Mazur (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2000), p. 80.

63 Zarzycka, "Etnocentryzm, polonocentryzm, wielokulturowość, wielogłosowość," p. 79.

foreign language. Talking of and teaching about rivers as the legacy of humanity in an engaging way would help us comprehend biodiversity the biohumanities covet so deeply today.

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Abstract

This paper aims to depict the place of and meanings attributed to the Vistula River and its cultural legacy in study materials for Polish language education. Embracing the blue-humanities model, the authors seek to establish what values are ascribed to the Vistula and how the narrative about the river can be revised in educational materials for teaching Polish

as a foreign language (PFL). In foreign language instruction, one cannot focus on the non-human world alone, because the central idea of language education is to communicate in the human world, but the blue humanities might inspire a shift in language education to pay more attention to the relations between the Polish-speaking community that inhabits a demarcated part of Europe and the freshwater ecosystem. In pragmatic terms, the adoption of the blue-humanities concept in foreign language education should prompt changes in the discourse on water reservoirs (rivers). The culture-making potential of water and the water-related cultural, artistic, and other events that put the river at the center of the narrative might be a foundation for didactic pursuits (foreign/Polish language instruction) and learning outcomes (the cognitive function of language in providing knowledge on the relations of communities and rivers). The paper analyzes the modes of narratives about the Vistula as the most frequently mentioned river in language education materials.

Keywords: blue humanities, Polish as a foreign language, the Vistula river.

A Book-Size Topic: On Rivers and Advertising in Teaching Polish as a Foreign Language (Selected Issues)¹

Introduction: On language and the river in the Polish language

When we express things by means of language, we do not simply convey information on them, but also depict, judge, and evaluate them. Language is anthropocentric, in the sense of being stamped by an inherently human perspective as it puts the human being at the center of the world and presupposes humans' privileged position in nature. All ethnic languages develop along with the culture, tradition, and history of the respective communities that use them. In her already classic "The Double Life of a Bilingual," Anna Wierzbicka² metaphorically compares language to a window that has its distinctive windowpanes, shape, and/or color and, as a result, offers a unique view on extralinguistic reality. When learning a foreign language, learners not infrequently realize that language is a filter that makes it possible to name and interpret extralinguistic reality in line with the needs and capacities of the community that speaks it. Consequently, mastering a new language entails not only the acquisition of some indispensable knowledge, grammatical competence, and vocabulary skills, but also an individualized process in which students learn to think in this language and find out about and assimilate elements of its culture. In a longer run, all this expands their modes of world-perception.

In colloquial Polish, "the river" (Polish: *rzeka*) first and foremost denotes "a mass of water having a clearly delineated streambed and flowing towards an

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- 1 The Polish title of this text: "Temat rzeka – o rzecze i reklamie w glottodydaktyce polonistycznej (wybrane zagadnienia)" illustrates the interplay of the metaphorical and literal meanings of the lexeme *rzeka*/river, which can be conveyed through a different metaphor in English. Polish *temat rzeka*, literally "the river of a theme/a fluvial topic," means a very broad and multifaceted subject matter that can be endlessly discussed, that is, "a book-size topic."
- 2 Anna Wierzbicka, "The Double Life of a Bilingual," in *Polish People and Culture in Australia*, eds. Roland Sussex and Jerzy Zubrzycki (Canberra: Australian National University, 1985), pp. 187–223.

estuary,” and the lexeme is often used metaphorically to refer to “a considerable volume/quantity of a liquid streaming from somewhere” (e.g., *rzeka łez, krwi, wódki*, literally: a river of tears, blood, vodka) and “a large number of objects, especially when moving together at a steady pace” (e.g., *rzeka ludzi, uciekinierów, pojazdów*, literally: a river of people, fugitives, vehicles; and also *rzeka reklam, kwiatów*, literally: a river of advertisements, flowers).³ Ethnolinguists unanimously agree that the river (*rzeka*) is primarily conceptualized in Polish (and in a number of other languages as well) as WATER, MOVEMENT, and not infrequently also as a BOUNDARY.⁴ The collocations listed in dictionaries of the Polish language⁵ indicate that, in Polish, the river (*rzeka*):

- a) performs certain activities (it flows, rolls its waters, hums/roars, meanders, runs to [literally: falls into] the sea);
- b) has defined sizes and levels (narrow, wide, huge, shallow, deep);
- c) is geographically differentiated (a mountain, lowland, underground river);
- d) has a particular structure (river bottom, streambed, basin, and banks) and has its beginning, course, and endpoint: spring, delta, or mouth; and its structure and movements are perceived vertically (the upper, middle, lower reaches/stretch of a river; go upstream/downstream—“move toward the springs/mouth of a river”);
- e) has a current with certain properties (a sluggish, swift, fast-flowing, lively river);
- f) may have a color (turquoise), purity (clean, dirty, polluted) and temperature (ice-cold);
- g) depends on the weather and climate and, as such, affects the environment (the river froze, flooded, subsided, dried up);
- h) given its changeability, has stereotypical feminine features (whimsicality) ascribed to it and can be a hazard (it is dangerous, rough-and-tumbling; it erodes/washes away the banks);

3 Stanisław Dubisz, ed., *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 3 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2003), p. 1114; entry “rzeka” in *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/1735/rzeka> [accessed 12.11.2023].

4 See Jerzy Bartmiński, “Rzeka w językowo-kulturowym obrazie świata Polaków,” in *Urzeczenie. Locje literatury i wyobraźni*, eds. Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), pp. 53–64; Jerzy Bartmiński, “Językowo-kulturowy obraz rzeki Wisły,” in *Językowe i kulturowe modelowanie świata. Księga dedykowana profesorowi Karolowi Danielowi Kadłubcowi*, eds. Katarzyna Marcol and Jan Kajfosz (Czeski Cieszyn: Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej – Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach – Ostrawa: Wydział Filozoficzny Uniwersytetu Ostrawskiego, 2017), pp. 39–55; Ewa Masłowska, “Ludowy stereotyp rzeki – zarys struktury,” in *Urzeczenie*, eds. Jochemczyk and Piotrowiak; Aleksandra Niewiara, “‘Wody płyną.’ ‘Piję wodę.’ Pierwotne i prototypowe konceptualizacje w językach indoeuropejskich,” in *Urzeczenie*, ed. Jochemczyk and Piotrowiak, pp. 43–51.

5 Dubisz, ed., *Uniwersalny słownik*; *Wielki słownik*, <https://wsjp.pl>.

- i) is a place where certain activities can be performed: swimming, fishing, casting a line, wading, becoming lost, drowning (somebody) in the river;
- j) serves humans, who treat it instrumentally (a navigable, floatable river) and interfere with it and its surroundings (regulating the watercourse, constructing bridges, dams, embankments, or barrages on the river); and
- k) demarcates natural and cultural boundaries (boundary, borderland, and transborder rivers; international rivers).

In the Polish linguistic world picture, the river is “a force beneficial and destructive at once, a natural element and a granary, a border and a road.”⁶ Folktales and fables handed down from generation to generation have made the formulaic expressions *za (dziesiątą, siódmą) górą, za (dziesiątą, siódmą) rzeką* (literally: over the [tenth/seventh] mountain, across the [tenth/seventh] river) and *za (siedmioma) górami, za (siedmioma) rzekami* (literally: [seven] mountains and [seven] rivers away from here)—both being the functional counterparts of “once upon a time” as a customary opening of fairy-tale narratives, and meaning “very far away; nobody knows where exactly; in the land of phantasy”—deeply entrenched fixed phrases in Polish. Other frequent phraseological combinations in Polish include *temat rzeka* (literally: the river of a theme), which denotes “a very broad subject matter with multiple facets to it that can be discussed endlessly,” and the literary term *powieść rzeka* (a saga; literally: a river-novel), which is a generic depiction of a multi-volume novel narrating the fortunes of several generations of a family. Among the most popular winged words in Polish (and in many other languages in our culture) is a maxim attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus, claiming that “one cannot step into the same river twice,” in which the movement of the river conveys the unrepeatability and transience of situations and events. A well-known proverb teaches: “Don’t push the river (it flows by itself),” warning against interfering with things that have their own course.

Commercial advertising and teaching Polish as a foreign language

My focus in this paper is on how river-related TV commercials can be used in Polish-as-a-foreign-language (PFL) classrooms (levels B1–B2) to improve the learners’ Polish language competence and, at the same time, to instill responsible consumer attitudes in them.

Commercial advertising is a tool businesses use to communicate with the market. It is defined as “any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and pro-

⁶ Bartmiński, “Rzeka,” p. 61.

motion of ideas, goods or services” that aims to encourage using them with a view to achieving productivity, trading, or service profits.⁷ The four fundamental functions of advertising are: 1) information (dissemination of product details: features, prices, venues and terms of sale); 2) support of sales (by persuading and reminding, it molds buyer attitudes and boosts loyalty to products, brands, and selling venues); 3) education (“teaching” customers how to satisfy their needs in new ways); and 4) competition (showing products as attractive in order to disturb competitors’ advertising campaigns).⁸

The consumerist worldview is informed by the belief that happiness is achieved through accumulation of material goods, and people’s worth is measured by the quantity and quality of their possessions. Excessive attachment to consumerism seems to be the greatest obstacle to effective environmental transformation for combating the ecological crisis.⁹ Consumerism fuels mass production, industrialization, and urbanization, which ever more radically separate humans from nature, restraining their contact with the natural world and, consequently, curbing opportunity to perceive the effects that human activities have on the natural world and to grasp how these effects might be prevented.¹⁰ As a counter-response, public environmental consciousness has begun to develop, with consumers paying attention not only to the price or quality of products, but also to their impact on the natural environment. Consequently, pro-environmental reasoning, which foregrounds care for the planet, has become more frequent in marketing (therein advertising) communication.

The themes of environmental protection and climate hazards are embraced in PFL coursework with increasing eagerness.¹¹ Related topics are explicitly in-

7 See Philip Kotler, *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 451; Robert Nowacki, *Podręcznik. Reklama* (Warszawa: Difin 2020), p. 49. If commercial advertising pursues financial gains, social advertising seeks ideological gains. I have discussed the application of environment-themed river-related social advertising in PFL instruction elsewhere; see Maria Waclawek, “Człowiek naturze zgotował ten los – rzecz o wybranej reklamie społecznej na lekcji języka polskiego jako obcego,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2023, t. 31, nr 1, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2023.31.01.

8 Nowacki, *Podręcznik*, pp. 39–40.

9 Dariusz Liszewski, “Konsumpcjonizm jako zjawisko kulturowe a transformacja ekologiczna,” in *Ekologia a procesy transformacji*, ed. Jan Dębowski (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2000), p. 60.

10 Consumerism results in predatory policies of unlimited economic growth, which in a long run is incompatible with the limited capacities—space and resource—of the planet.

11 See Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron, “Treści proekologiczne w glottodydaktyce polonistycznej na podstawie podręczników i badań ankietowych w perspektywie metodyki zadaniowej,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2021, t. 28, nr 2, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2021.28.04; Gabriela Olchowa, “Edukacja klimatyczna w podręcznikach do nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego dla poziomu A2,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2021, t. 28, nr 2, pp. 1–12, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2021.28.03; Magdalena Zakrzewska-Verdugo, “Klimat i środowisko naturalne w podręcznikach do nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego przenie-

corporated in standard frameworks for PFL certification examinations and in thematic catalogues for PFL textbooks, mainly for levels B1–B2. On this level of language proficiency, speakers of Polish are expected to be able to use vocabulary concerning the weather, seasons of the year, the vegetal and animal world and, crucially, the climate and environmental issues. Learners having an intermediate command of the language (B1–B2) can talk about commercial advertising with relative ease and are able to examine isolated commercial messages. For example, such learners are expected to understand texts which are broadcast in the media (main focal points and specific information) and comprehend utterances delivered in standard language with idiomatic elements “even in relatively noisy settings.”¹² They are also supposed to articulate their views and opinions with clarity.

The use of commercials in foreign language education is functionally warranted, and it can be an attractive addition to textbook routines. When one shows a TV advertisement as part of foreign language instruction, one provides the learners with an authentic (uncontrived) cultural production that is easily recognizable, ties in with most learners’ typical experiences, shows current realities, and addresses issues of the day (or, rather, deliberately profiled needs of viewers, who are encouraged to act in a certain way, that is, to use the product being offered). The brevity of the message is also an asset; with a typical TV commercial lasting between 15 and 30 seconds, it can be replayed several times during a lesson. Advertising messages are suggestive, catchy, dynamic, and accessible, all of which helps foreigners remember the language structures they employ. Commercials characteristically condense meanings, use wordplay, and mobilize verbal, visual, and audio devices. They also use familiar elements of the cultural legacy in unique ways, mustering language clichés, stereotypes, well-known pieces of music, passages from popular movies and fiction, etc. In other words, what Poles easily recognize, commonly relate to, and like is used and adjusted to what commercials advertise, making for a linguistically and culturally captivating resource for teaching Polish as a foreign language. Besides, advertisements invite

zonych dla Słowaków,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 2021, t. 28, nr 2, pp. 1–14, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2021.28.05; Waclawek, “Człowiek naturze zgotował ten los”; Maria Waclawek, “Ekologia dźwignią handlu? O reklamie komercyjnej na lekcji języka polskiego (jako obcego),” in *Edukacja humanistyczna V4 dla klimatu. Rozpoznania – dobre praktyki – rekomendacje. The V4 Humanities Education for the Climate. Diagnoses – Best Practices – Recommendations*, eds. Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska, Maria Waclawek, and Zuzana Obertová (in collaboration with Ivana Dobrotová and Anita Račáková) (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023), pp. 333–355, https://wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/site/s/wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl/files/wus_2023_niesporek-szamburska_waclawek_obertova_edukacja_humanistyczna_ebook.pdf [accessed 12. 11. 2023].

12 Council of Europe, *Europejski system opisu kształcenia językowego: uczenie się, nauczanie, ocenianie*, trans. Waldemar Martyniuk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Centralnego Ośrodka Doskonalenia Nauczycieli, 2013), p. 208.

students to comment on and depict in their own words what they see and hear, in this way supplying a perfect stimulus for discussion both on a given commercial and, in broader terms, on consumerism, the climate crisis, and the urgency of action for the planet. Importantly, the informed and conscious decoding of commercial messages is a highly practical skill, which is fostered in foreigners by sensitizing them to the verbal and non-verbal means of persuasion and manipulation applied in Polish culture.

Advertisements with the river motif in teaching Polish as a foreign language

A cursory glimpse at commercial advertisements is enough to realize that they treat rivers (and, in broader terms, water) instrumentally and marshal the motif to secure financial gains.

One strategy used by companies in their pro-ecological image-building and sales campaigns is to make their advertisements highlight the corporate dedication to environmentally friendly pursuits and/or the unique natural (and tourist) qualities purportedly inherent in the consumer goods they advertise. Such operations have proven to be an effective marketing approach. Colors, images, and sounds are not infrequently latent persuasion means that prompt the viewers to draw conclusions about the commodity or the service in a commercial. Advertisements that use the river motif are composed in the color palette associated with nature and water (primarily various hues of green, blue, and turquoise). The visual layer characteristically amasses images of natural landscapes with a river in the foreground or the background (e.g., a mountain creek, a waterfall, a riverbank, or a river beach), animals and plants typical of such natural habitats (e.g., beavers, birds, fish, grass, shrubs, woods, wildflowers, etc.), sounds of nature (the humming of water, the chirping of crickets, the twitter of birds, and the flutter of their wings), and things people do on the water (e.g., swimming, canoeing, fishing, sunbathing, etc.). The purpose-designed visual and audio layers of commercials are supposed to engender certain moods (e.g., relaxation, repose, tranquility) and to evoke a range of favorable associations and meanings, which are transferred on the products they advertise. The verbal layer of the message underscores the importance of the natural environment to humans, the idea being reinforced by pro-ecological slogans and ecology-connoting product or brand names (e.g., nouns such as nature and the spring, adjectives derived from them, and compounds prefixed with bio-, eco- and organic). The visual, audio, and verbal components are intertwined to trigger certain associations, which, depending on copywriters' purposes, range from hominess, idyll, and

return to the roots (to mother nature), to tranquility, purity, freshness, and refreshment, to adventure, fun, and holidays.

Illuminating effects can be achieved by showing older and more recent river-themed commercials in classroom, both those that espouse environmental marketing (seeking to show commitment to the planet and societies) and those that do not. Let us start from the latter.

Colgate toothpaste

In 2004, TV broadcasters in Poland emitted a Colgate Herbal Propolis commercial, including the music of “Rzeka we mnie” [“The River within Me”], a then-popular song by the cult Polish singer Małgorzata Ostrowska. The action of the commercial was set on a riverbank, and its central protagonist was a (cartoon) beaver, an animal stereotypically/culturally perceived as having strong and healthy teeth. A human couple on a hiking outing came across the beaver as it was inspecting a tree for propolis, an important ingredient of the advertised toothpaste (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Screenshots from a Colgate Herbal Propolis commercial¹³

13 “Colgate reklama 2004,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=BOz-vDhuW-4&ab_channel=reklamaiSponsorprogramuwPolsce [accessed 12. 11. 2023].

The culminating catchphrase (*Zdrowsze dziąsła i mocne zęby, naturalnie!* Literally: Healthier gums and strong teeth, naturally!) was deliberately elliptical. The slogan form entails a greater condensation of the content, which produces a persuasive effect. It was up to the audience to fill in the missing verb contextually: *Colgate Herbal Propolis* [guarantees] *healthier gums and strong teeth, naturally!* “Naturally” was used in its dual meaning: a) as an adverb meaning “by nature, as in nature,” which was devised to convince the viewers that the ingredients of the product were good for them; and b) as an adverbial interjection meaning “obviously, of course” and communicating that what the commercial stated was beyond any doubt.

The commercial can be used to encourage the use of storytelling in the PFL classroom and to give learners some insight into Polish musical culture.

Żywiec Zdrój mineral water

The river is a “natural” symbol commonly associated with mineral water offered by its producers. Advertisements of mineral water and related beverages very frequently feature potamic motifs (from Greek *potamos* = a river). Żywiec Zdrój is no exception to this rule. The verbal layer of its 15-second commercial from 2023 is composed of three utterances (two finite sentences and a verbless slogan): *To naturze zawdzięczamy naszą krystaliczną górską wodę. Dlatego dbamy o nią i już po raz trzeci zebraliśmy tyle plastiku, ile wprowadziliśmy na rynek. Żywiec Zdrój. Z natury dla natury* (literally: It is to nature that we owe our crystal-clear mountain water. This is why we take care of nature and, for the third time around, we’ve reclaimed as much plastic as we’ve put on the market. Żywiec Zdrój. From nature for nature). Nothing more is needed. The message underscores the actions the company regularly launches to minimize its environmental impact.¹⁴ The key terms of the commercial are: nature, crystal-clear, and *zdrój* (a spring-well, a source, a spa). The latter is particularly important because it plays on verbal polysemy. Specifically, *zdrój* can be a common noun for a) a place in the ground from which water springs and b) a stream/brook, and, if capitalized, it is also c) part of compound proper names of many Polish spa resorts famous for their healing waters (such as Kudowa Zdrój, Busko Zdrój, etc.), as well as being a component of the corporate name of the company: Żywiec Zdrój S.A.¹⁵ The company is situated in the Żywiec Protected Landscape Area and produces

14 The commercial explains what the voice-over statement means in a line that appears on the screen: “We have collected the equivalent of 100% of the plastic* (*equivalent of the plastic we put on the market last year).”

15 S.A. (*spółka akcyjna*) stands for a joint-stock company. (translator’s note)

bottled water and beverages, using the local springs. While the narrator of the commercial never in fact utters the noun “river,” the river is its indispensable mute protagonist. First, a picture of a river can be seen on the label around the plastic bottle of the consumer good on offer, and then frames showing a river are woven into the clip’s narrative, which is capped with a doubling of the image: the river is seen in the background as part of the mountainous landscape and in the foreground on the product label (see Figure 2).

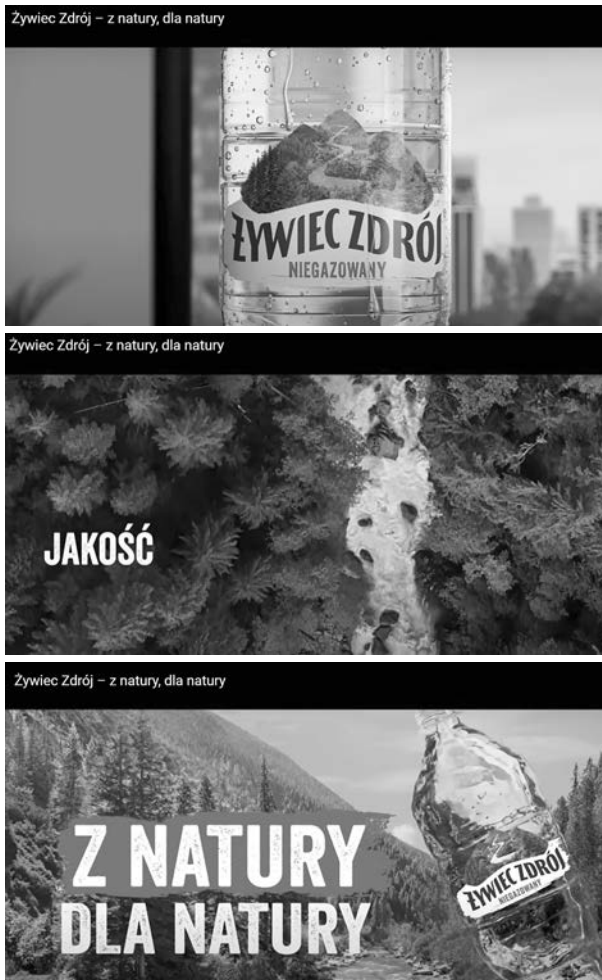


Figure 2. Screenshots of a Żywiec Zdrój mineral water commercial¹⁶

16 “Żywiec Zdrój – z natury, dla natury,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etmgK8HG1K0&ab_channel=ŻywiecZdrój [accessed 12. 11. 2023].

In PFL coursework, the commercial can be an interesting starting point for discussion on the role of rivers as such and for a symbolic search for the river, first in the commercial itself and then in reality beyond advertising. In this way, reflection can be sparked on what the river means in (Polish and non-Polish) culture and to the students themselves.

Almette cheese spread

The Almette commercials of 2020 are untypical in being over two minutes long. They form a diptych that revolves around Węgrów, a small town on the border of Polesia and Mazovia in eastern Poland, located amid the picturesque countryside stretching along the Liwiec River (see Figure 3). Both advertising spots are stylized as mini touring reportages portraying the tourist attractions and natural sights of the region. The advertising “shows” are run by well-known and highly successful individuals hailing from Węgrów. One of the commercials is narrated by Nela Zawadzka, a finalist of *The Voice Kids* talent show, who sent the jury into raptures over her dashing rendition of Małgorzata Ostrowska’s song “Meluzyna” [“Melusine”].¹⁷ The other commercial stars Mariola Zenik, a volleyball player, European champion, and recipient of the Gold Cross of Merit. Almette cheese spread is manufactured in Węgrów, and the producer’s Polish website describes the place as “a unique [...] area of pristine nature, which offers ideal conditions for the production of healthy food.”¹⁸ A celebrity—a recognizable, acknowledged, and well-liked person—who eulogizes the charms of their home region, its local and unique historical heritage, natural beauties, the harmony of humans and nature, and products manufactured in the area has a strong persuasive power and can inspire viewers to imitate them. The commercials do not brazenly thrust their message on the audience, and the individuals featured in them come across as authentic in their admiration of their home region. The country-style music that accompanies images and text enhances the sense of cozy familiarity.

17 Another song by Ostrowska was used as a musical background in the Colgate commercial discussed above.

18 “Almette powstaje w Węgrowie,” <https://www.almette.pl/z-polski> [accessed 12. 11. 2023].



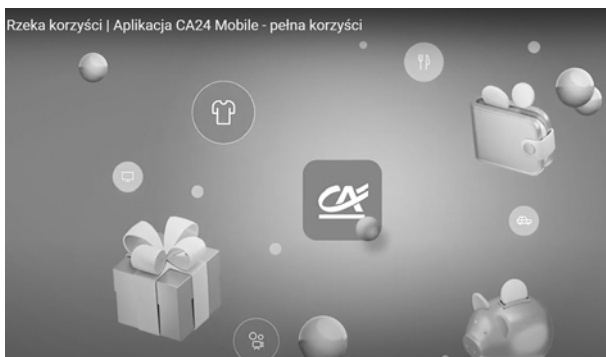
Figure 3. Screenshots of Almette cheese spread commercials¹⁹

The Almette advertising spots offer a perfect opportunity not only for organizing PFL coursework around what healthy food really is and how crucial it is not to waste food, but also for addressing the themes of healthy lifestyle in general, local patriotism, attachment to one's region, and success underpinned by talent and hard work. Besides, the clips with their picturesque scenery of the Liwiec River and happy protagonists are a good starting point for speaking exercises in landscape depiction and writing workshops on how to achieve health, contentment, and success.

19 "Węgrów i jego znani mieszkańcy," <https://www.almette.pl/z-polski> [accessed 12.11.2023].

Crédit Agricole mobile app

The marketing campaign of Crédit Agricole pivoted on yet another concept. Like in the Colgate commercial, the offer of the bank was presented without any explicit reference to pro-environmental concerns. Rather, the advertising spot relied on the metaphorical meaning that the river has in Polish as “a large quantity/volume of something.” The commercial talked of an online banking app as a *rzeka korzyści*, literally meaning “a river of benefits” (see Figure 4). The wordplay²⁰ was sustained on the bank’s Polish homepage, which told the customers that “the *river of benefits* is a site that gives you access to thousands of shopping discounts and attractive banking bargains and offers. You’ll find it on the app’s dashboard. Click the offer you find interesting to find out about the details of the bargain. Then follow the instructions on the screen. You can use the discount code immediately or keep it for later.”²¹



20 On the whole, advertisements offer ample opportunities for word-formation exercises, which are made attractive to students by wordplay. An interesting river-related concept was employed in a 2006 commercial of the no longer existent Heyah mobile network operator. The advertising spot whose action was set on a riverbank beach was stylized as a popular socialist newsreel. The axial idea of the commercial was wordplay on the verb *pleść*, literally meaning *weave* (in this case: make wickerwork) and metaphorically referring to chattering nonsense. The advertisement can be used in the PFL classroom to start a conversation on what one can do by the river on weekends (real activities and made-up pastimes). Advanced PFL learners can be encouraged to indulge in derivation play around the noun “*rzeka/river*” and compose a word family (*rzeka/river* – *rzeczka/small river*, *rzeczulka/tiny river*, *rzeczny/fluvial*) and their own neologisms (*rzekobranie/riverpicking* = “fishing in a river,” *rzeking/rivering* = “swimming in/sailing on a river,” *rzekogrill/rivercue* = “a barbecue by a river,” or *rzekon/river-puss* = “a pretty but rather low-aspiring girl sunbathing by the river,” cf. the slang *lachon/glamour-puss*). See “Heyah Wiklina Rzeka 2006,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExsKIEoU2Nk&ab_channel=OpusFilm [accessed 12. 11. 2023].

21 “Co to jest rzeka korzyści?,” <https://www.credit-agricole.pl/pytania-i-odpowiedzi/aplikacja-ca24-mobile/co-to-jest-rzeka-korzysci> [accessed 12. 11. 2023].



Figure 4. Screenshots of a Crédit Agricole mobile app commercial²²

The Crédit Agricole commercial can help discuss the meanings of lexemes “river/river” and “water/woda” in Polish and affords opportunities for phraseological exercises with expressions containing these nouns, verbs of unidirectional motion (e.g., *płynąć*: to flow, to sail, etc.) and multidirectional motion (e.g., *pływać*: to swim, to sail around, to float, etc.), and their prefixed derivatives (e.g., *wypłynąć*, *dopłynąć*, *przepłynąć*, *odpłynąć*,²³ etc.). Additionally, the verbal layer of the advertisement is convenient for consolidating the learners’ command of the imperative mood, as second-person imperative verbs proliferate in its text (enter, find out, choose, grab, save, discover, be delighted, love). At the same time, the persuasive functions of such structures (distance reduction, encouragement to act) can be discussed with foreigners.

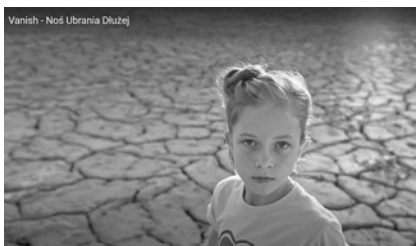
22 “Rzeka korzyści | Aplikacja CA24 Mobile – pełna korzyści,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6-DIRPDGxY&ab_channel=CreditAgricoleBankPolskaS.A [accessed 12.11.2023].

23 The verbs do not have straightforward equivalents in English. In general terms, their stem *-płynąć* refers to flowing, swimming, sailing, drifting, floating, etc., depending on the context; the prefixes *wy-*, *do-*, *prze-* and *od-*, convey the senses of, respectively, up/off, to/at, across/through, and away. (translator’s note)

Vanish liquid

Ethnolinguists explain that Polish common nouns such as *rzeka*/river, *strumień*/stream, and *potok*/creek have the meaning of movement/flowing inscribed in them, and that the motionlessness of water can be retraced in the names of stagnant waters.²⁴ For example, the noun *jezioro* (lake), which denotes a natural dip in the ground forming a water reservoir, is derived from *jaz* (weir), that is “a dike, a dam on the river.” The lake image is another water-related element used for marketing purposes in TV commercials.

One of the Polish advertising spots of the Vanish cleaning agent has a rhyming slogan phrased as an imperative/a command: *Noś ubrania dłużej, wodę zostaw naturze!* (literally: Wear your clothes for longer, leave water to nature!).²⁵ The message aims to present the detergent as a pro-environmental product. The ad suggests that by buying Vanish, we protect our clothes and in this way contribute to saving water (huge quantities of water are used to manufacture clothing, in particular cotton²⁶). The commercial has a profoundly suggestive visual layer that illustrates the idea that if we purchase the chemical, we will not only prevent Polish lakes from drying up, but may also reverse the effects of the process, as the water is replenished in the lake, as if by miracle, when Vanish is added to the laundry in the spot (see Figure 5). Having used the product, the implied viewers of the commercial can “see” that they indeed act for the sake of nature and this gives them satisfaction.



24 Bartmiński, “Rzeka,” p. 59.

25 “Vanish – Noś Ubrania Dłużej,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg0nIJEQkoM&ab_channel=VanishPolska [accessed 12.11.2023]. I have described a PFL lesson using this commercial elsewhere; see Waclawek, “Ekologia dźwignią handlu.”

26 In classroom, students can be told that the Aral Sea, a unique endorheic, salty lake situated in present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, did actually dry up as a result of human short-sighted and predatory activities, mainly related to irrigating cotton plantations in the area. In the 1960s, the Aral Sea was the fourth largest lake in the world. The shrinking of its waters resulted in one of the most severe ecological disasters in the former USSR territory. Today, there are three separate water reservoirs where the Aral Sea once was.



Figure 5. Screenshots of a Vanish Oxy Action commercial²⁷

Promoting environmentally engaged attitudes is important, advantageous, and above all indispensable. This involves enhancing environmental sensibility and the realization that water resources (in Poland and globally) are limited, which urges the dissemination of sustainable consumerism or rather deconsumption attitudes. Besides offering such discussion triggers, the Vanish commercial can also be usefully employed in talking about the critical reception of advertising messages. Patently, the spot passes over the non-ecological aspects of the merchandise it advertises. The clip is a perfect starting point for reflection on greenwashing.²⁸ Needless to say, pro-ecological marketing strategies not infrequently fail to translate into any real efforts to protect nature...

Marketing does not aim to satisfy our needs; rather, it is designed to amplify and multiply them. In the advertising world, unrestricted and spontaneous purchase of material goods is associated with freedom and pleasure. Yet, adopting such commercially marketed behavior patterns often bespeaks “enslavement”—dependence on materialistic lifestyles. Daniel Goleman²⁹ calls for radical transparency, which he defines as the total disclosure of information on how the things we produce, buy, use, and then dump affect the environment. We should have access to the life-cycle assessment (LCA) of products and under-

²⁷ “Vanish – Noś Ubrania Dłużej.”

²⁸ Pure greenwashing involves spreading disinformation to make the public (consumers) believe that a given organization (company) operates in socially responsible ways vis-à-vis the natural environment (e. g., highlighting its purported efforts to reduce its detrimental impact on the natural environment, making false ecological promises, etc.).

²⁹ Daniel Goleman, *Ecological Intelligence: The Hidden Impacts of What We Buy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009).

stand how and in how far they influence the environment at each stage of this process: from manufacturing to disposal. Should “radical transparency” be implemented, our use of the resources is likely to become more effective and the burden to the environment to decrease, translating into a growing demand from ever more ecologically conscious consumers and thus into an increased competitiveness of the product. When we make choices as consumers, we should remember that less in fact is more. The things that are genuinely and highly valuable, such as friendship, love, freedom, and inner joy, are not bought for money.

Conclusion

Commercial advertisements can be harnessed to a variety of educational uses by teachers of Polish as a foreign language. They certainly help students better understand the culture and realities of the country whose language they learn. This supports learners’ intercultural communication competence. Intercultural skills comprise, for example, cultural sensitivity, ability to overcome stereotypes, and awareness of similarities and differences between one’s native and foreign cultures.³⁰ Given this, learning a foreign language has been described as the learners’ quest for their “third place” in culture.³¹ When the content of commercials is made part of coursework, a negotiation of meanings takes place between what the foreign students themselves understand in the advertisements as cultural productions and how these cultural productions are comprehended by native language speakers. Such negotiations promote the development, in teachers and in students alike, of the attitude of an intercultural interlocutor,³² also dubbed an intercultural mediator³³ and an intercultural diplomat.³⁴

Commercial advertising materials can be used in foreign language education to encourage discussion on consumerism, materialism, and a range of current issues. Besides, knowledge on advertising persuasion and manipulation devices can be expanded in this way, and the capacity to identify and fend those off can be

30 Council of Europe, *Europejski system*, p. 96.

31 Claire J. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

32 Grażyna Zarzycka, “Opis pedagogiki zorientowanej na rozwój kompetencji i wrażliwości interkulturowej,” in *W poszukiwaniu nowych rozwiązań. Dydaktyka języka polskiego jako obcego u progu XXI wieku*, eds. Władysław Tadeusz Miodunka and Anna Seretny (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2008), pp. 63–78.

33 Michael Byram and Geneviève Zarate, eds., *The Sociocultural and Intercultural Dimension of Language* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1997).

34 John Corbett, *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching* (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, and Sydney: Multilingual Matters LTD, 2003).

fostered. As a result, informed, environmentally responsible consumer decisions can be made.

Ecolinguistics explicitly states that while non-linguistic reality affects language, language also affects reality, including the relations of humans and nature.³⁵ Since “[a]nthropocentrism has provided order and structure to humans’ understanding of the world,” it has also delineated the limits of the understanding we have with and of nature, the environment, and non-human creatures.³⁶ In today’s humanities (posthumanism, eco-philosophy, eco-criticism, animal studies, ecolinguistics, etc.), discussions are rife on the urgency to abandon anthropocentrism and embrace, for example, deep ecology.³⁷ To be fully human, we must go back as a human community to the origins of our existence and grasp the significance of the natural environment. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski argued, “we can better comprehend our own humanity” in the absolute respect of nature.³⁸ As humans, we are unique in that we realize that we are the guardians of the treasury of evolution.³⁹

How humans relate to rivers hinges on their more general attitudes to nature, which depend both on cultural configurations, with sets of acceptable practices differing from community to community, and on every individual’s personal experiences. This is one reason why proper education, including aqua-education, is important and should nurture ecological awareness and ecological intelligence. Ecological awareness should be: a) holistic (with the world understood as one interrelated whole); b) qualitative (perception of interconnections in the world, multi-sensorial and personalized appreciation of nature); c) spiritual (deep bonding of humans and the natural world, genuine coexistence with all forms of life); d) reverential (respectful of everything that exists because it is not redundant or meaningless); e) evolutionary (the direction of cosmic processes); and f) participatory (humans are not just observers of the world, but an important component of the world).⁴⁰ For its part, ecological intelligence enables us to apply what we learn about the impact of our actions on the ecosystem so as to

35 Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler, eds., *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment* (London–New York: Continuum, 2001), https://linguisticstudentindonesia.files.wordpress.com/2019/11/alwin-fill-peter-muhlhauser-the-ecolinguistics-reader_-language-ecology-and-environment-2001.pdf [accessed 12. 12. 2023]; Magdalena Steciąg, *Język w epoce antropocenu. Ujęcie ekolingwistyczne* (Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2023).

36 Rob Boddice, “Introduction: The End of Anthropocentrism,” in *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, ed. Rob Boddice (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 1.

37 See, e.g., Boddice, *Anthropocentrism*.

38 Leszek Kołakowski, *Mini wykłady o maxi sprawach. Trzy serie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2022), p. 115.

39 Henryk Skolimowski, *Living Philosophy: Eco-Philosophy as a Tree of Life* (New York: Arkana, 1992).

40 Skolimowski, *Living Philosophy*.

adjust our operations accordingly and cause less damage to the natural environment.⁴¹ Aqua-education should encompass both self-study and systemic policies. It is associated with inculcating the idea that when we are by or on the river we are guests, while at the same time being “at home.” Being “at home,” we are responsible for the river as we can immediately influence it and the area around it. The axiological dimension must be buttressed. Such instruction processes lead to achieving cognitive aims (acquisition and expansion of knowledge of river-related issues), instructional aims (conversion of knowledge into skills and praxis), and educational aims (development of self-awareness and pro-ecological attitudes). The educational turn-to-the-river can be implemented in a variety of forms: analytical and applicatory activities in classroom, extra-mural educational projects, media campaigns, movie screenings, and happenings.

If we endorse the notion championed by the traditional humanists, who follow Protagoras in stating that the human is the measure of all things, water is certainly the measure of all existence (not only for us).

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

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Abstract

Language is anthropocentric; it emphasizes the human perspective. All ethnic languages develop along with the culture, tradition, and history of the respective communities that use them. When learning a foreign language, learners realize that language is a filter that makes it possible to name and interpret extralinguistic reality in line with the needs and capacities of the community that speaks it. Foreign language learning expands learners’ modes of world-perception and can alter their worldviews and attitudes. The article encourages combining Polish-as-a-foreign-language (PFL) education and the fostering of ecological awareness and intelligence. The text focuses on how river/water-related advertisements can be employed in PFL classrooms (B1/B2) with a view to developing the learners’ Polish language competence and instilling responsible consumer attitudes. New ways of defining the world (channeled through a foreign language) should be associated with an empathetic approach that encompasses both humans and nature of which they are part.

Keywords: river, Polish as a foreign language, ecological awareness, ecological intelligence, good practices, advertising.

Water and Its Therapeutic Potential: Educational Inspirations from Regional and Local Projects

The use of water for therapeutic purposes has both a long history and a rich tradition across cultures and communities. Water baths were applied even before Hippocrates, and sanatoriums—temples of health—were erected in the vicinity of water springs.¹ While initially only accessible to the rich, *thermae*, bathhouses, and steam baths came to be more commonly frequented and garnered considerable popularity. Hippocrates himself dedicated two of his writings to water and its properties.²

Eleventh-century Polish chronicles report that the wife of Władysław I Herman, the duke of Poland, appreciated the medicinal properties of water and register the expanding popularity of bathing and water-drinking.³ From the 16th century onward, water cures became increasingly widespread in Poland, including as a separate therapeutic discipline, initially *balneo-climatology* and *balneology*.

Given that the therapeutic and medicinal uses of water are almost countless and can be discussed from a variety of viewpoints, the focus of this paper is deliberately narrowed down to three thematic concerns: the application of water in the treatment of somatic and mental disorders (through water ingestion, procedures involving water, and, briefly mentioned, physiotherapeutic uses of water), arts therapy (including music therapy and *thalassotherapy*), and the therapeutic interventions that involve rivers and river landscape. The closing subject to be explored is the river of life metaphor and its uses in therapy.

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1 For a historical overview of medical spa treatments, see Irena Ponikowska and David Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa* (Warszawa: MEDI Press, 2009), pp. 13–17.

2 Hippocrates, *O powietrzu, wodach i okolicach*, trans. Anna Marchewka and Magdalena Świder (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2014), and <https://polona.pl/item-view/0496b7eb-da5c-4421-a7d2-9157e4169c82?page=30> [accessed 20. 11. 2023]. For an English edition, see Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, trans. Francis Adams (London, 1849), The Internet Classic Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/airwatpl.mb.txt> [accessed 20. 11. 2023].

3 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 14.

I will seek to show water as a medicinal substance based on its chemical composition and thermal indicators. Consistently with the “fluvial” focus of this volume, my educational exemplifications are circumscribed to those with rivers as their pivot.

As water is a veritably boundless theme, my discussion of the salutary effects of water⁴ is ordered by the senses through which water can be experienced: sight, taste, hearing, touch, and smell. I also analyze multisensorial, inter-, and intrapsychical experiences. The examples I cite are not meant as a complete catalogue; on the contrary, they are supposed to indicate the vast multiplicity of the manners in which water can be experienced in its various iterations. The immensity of the element is overwhelming, but its therapeutic power captivates and its capacities appear limitless.

Visual impressions

Landscape undoubtedly possesses a therapeutic power.⁵ When we think of water, diverse aquatic landscapes come to our mind: seas, lakes, rivers, ponds, waterfalls, and broader views with waterscape at the center and other landscape features, animals, plants, and/or people in the background. As another association, we may conjure images of things beneath the water surface—an underwater world with its copious fauna and flora. A range of positive emotions can be evoked by looking at water-related weather phenomena, such as rainfall, the drying of stones, thunderstorms, and the changing geometries of riverbeds, waves, etc. Therapeutic effects are produced not only in and through direct experience (though its multisensorial quality will spark the most intense sensations). Spatial visualizations and the contemplation of landscape (variously mediated by movies, photographs, graphics, drawings, and paintings⁶) can have healing outcomes as well. As rightly noted by Joanna Angiel in her book on river-related educational inspirations, “all rivers probably have—and certainly can have—their portraits painted by artists who perceive their beauty and distinctiveness.”⁷ The contemplation of such works may work as arts therapy.

The visual aspects of landscapes and their therapeutic role have been studied by scholars from multiple perspectives. The effects of visual contrasts and ex-

4 The paper only concerns the beneficial effects of water on humans and their health.

5 Sarah Bell, Clare Hickman, and Frank Houghton, “From Therapeutic Landscape to Therapeutic ‘Sensescape’ Experiences with Nature? A Scoping Review,” *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 2023, no. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2022.100126>.

6 Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2015).

7 Joanna Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego and Wydział Geografii i Studiów Regionalnych, 2016), p. 45.

periences of natural features have been examined.⁸ Research has found that “waterscapes” can have a therapeutic dimension to them, improve the quality of life for patients with somatic conditions⁹ and mental disorders,¹⁰ and help participants in alcohol therapy cope with their addiction.¹¹

Aquatic landscapes and opportunities to look at them are a factor in enhancing the quality of life of chronic and immobilized patients and of inmates in penitentiaries. Landscape contemplation has been shown to effectively support the rehabilitation process, helping reduce the distress (frustration) of imprisonment.¹²

Waterscapes are associated with color blue and often also green because of the frequent proximity of forests, fields, and grassland. Both colors have a soothing effect in chromotherapy. Blue is “a cooling color with strong calming and relaxing properties. It enhances focus, increases expressive power, and kindles the sense of security.”¹³ For its part, green “intensifies concentration and facilitates sensory perception [...] it can be used to foster the atmosphere of calm and relaxation. Green is refreshing and nerve-placating; it restores tranquility and peace, alleviates fear, reduces the shock experienced in traumatic situations, and buttresses the sense of security; as the color of nature, it symbolizes the renewal of life.”¹⁴ Therapeutic effects are produced not only by the direct experience of these colors but also by imagining them, breathing them in, and looking at them in paintings.¹⁵ Being surrounded by colors blue and green, in natural settings and beyond them, significantly ameliorates wellbeing in elderly people.¹⁶

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- 8 Easkey Britton and Ronan Foley, “Sensing Water: Uncovering Health and Well-being in the Sea and Surf,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 2021, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 60–87.
- 9 Jan Pascal, “Space, Place, and Psychosocial Well-being: Women’s Experience of Breast Cancer at an Environmental Retreat,” *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 2010, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 201–16.
- 10 Eric Windhorst and Allison Williams, “It’s Like a Different World: Natural Places, Post-secondary Students, and Mental Health,” *Health & Place* 2015, no. 34, pp. 241–250.
- 11 Niamk K. Shortt, Sarah J. Rhynas, and Aisha Holloway, “Place and Recovery from Alcohol Dependence: A Journey through Photovoice,” *Health & Place* 2017, no. 47, pp. 147–155.
- 12 Yvonne Jewkes, Dominique Moran, and Jennifer Turner, “Just Add Water: Prisons, Therapeutic Landscapes, and Healthy Blue Space,” *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 2020, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 381–398.
- 13 Krystyna Moczka and Joanna Godawa, “Malowane słowem, gestem, oddechem..., czyli koloroterapia na zajęciach terapeutyczno-rewalidacyjnych,” *Chowanna* 2009, nr 1, p. 100.
- 14 Moczka and Godawa, “Malowane słowem, gestem, oddechem,” p. 99.
- 15 For more data, see Charis Lengen, “The Effects of Colours, Shapes and Boundaries of Landscapes on Perception, Emotion and Mentalising Processes Promoting Health and Well-Being,” *Health & Place* 2015, no. 35, pp. 166–177.
- 16 Jessica Finlay, Thea Franke, Heather McKay, and Joanie Sims-Gould, “Therapeutic Landscapes and Wellbeing in Later Life: Impacts of Blue and Green Spaces for Older Adults,” *Health & Place* 2015, no. 34, pp. 97–106.

Experiencing the sound of water

Water and the sounds and noises it emits can have a healing power. Various bodies of water—oceans, seas, rivers, waterfalls, streams, rain, and even rainstorms—are used in music therapy. When applying those, music therapy tends to take passive forms, with people listening to pieces of music. Yet the aquatic motif is also involved in active music therapy, where people generate sounds that imitate the aquaworld and various aspects of waterscape.

One example is provided by music therapy for convalescing post-surgery patients. Research has found that recovery was faster in people who listened to sounds of music, as compared with control groups.¹⁷ Multiple studies have also shown that “water noises” reduce stress and lower cortisol levels.¹⁸ The sounds produced by various forms of water are used in relaxation music and breathing exercises. It is not without reason that the motif of a walk along the seashore is utilized in Edmund Jacobson’s progressive relaxation, as adapted by Czesław Holas, which is one of the most common training varieties.

Sounds in the natural environment may occasionally be unpleasant and uncomfortable to people (or animals).¹⁹ To establish what levels of sound intensity impact the experience of relaxation, studies have been conducted by means of virtual reality tools (VR). Their findings indicate that, as opposed to direct experience, VR helps achieve optimum stimulation through the loudness and pitch of sounds in order to enhance listeners’ agreeable sensations.²⁰ This research was inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, and its findings proved that blue-sound therapy²¹ could be applied in VR environments as well. This offers an opportunity

17 Myriam Thoma, Ricarda Mewes, and Urs Nater, “Preliminary Evidence: The Stress-reducing Effect of Listening to Water Sounds Depends on Somatic Complaints: A Randomized Trial,” *Medicine (Baltimore)* February 2018, no. 97 (8), <https://doi.org/10.1097/md.00000000000009851>.

18 Jasper Alvarsson, Stefan Wiens, and Mats Nilsson, “Stress Recovery during Exposure to Nature Sound and Environmental Noise,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2010, no. 7, pp. 1036–1046, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph7031036>.

19 Jeon Jin Yong, Lee Pyoung, You Jin, and Jain Kang, “Acoustical Characteristics of Water Sounds for Soundscape Enhancement in Urban Open Spaces,” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 2012, no. 131, pp. 2101–2109, <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.3681938>.

20 Chung-Heng Hsieh, Ju-Yuan Yang, Chun-Wei Huang, and Wei Chien Benny Chin, “The Effect of Water Sound Level in Virtual Reality: A Study of Restorative Benefits in Young Adults through Immersive Natural Environments,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 2023, no. 88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102012>; see also Matilda Annerstedt, Peter Jönsson, Mattias Wallergård, Gerd Johansson, Björn Karlson, Patrik Grahn, Ase Marie Hansen, and Peter Währborg, “Inducing Physiological Stress Recovery with Sounds of Nature in a Virtual Reality Forest: Results from a Pilot Study,” *Physiology & Behavior* 2013, no. 118, pp. 240–250, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2013.05.023>.

21 The term “blue sounds” denotes sounds produced by water (water sounds/aquatic sounds).

to immerse in nature at least virtually to people who cannot experience nature hands-on for various reasons.

As evinced by research, water sounds may influence work performance (increasing its efficiency) and affect the level of concentration and the reduction of other sounds.²² Besides their beneficial visual properties, water landscapes in city spaces also come with ambient sounds that effectively camouflage urban noise and are associated with silence and peacefulness.²³ The soothing power of water sounds also supports the therapy of people with ADHD. Sometimes it helps considerably reduce pharmacotherapy or may even replace it.²⁴

Water-generated white noise may have a salutary influence on work hygiene and improve focus.²⁵ Besides, it increases learning capacity; for example, it reinforces foreign language acquisition in adult learners²⁶ and facilitates learning to read in children, including those with dyslexia.²⁷

The taste and smell of water

Mineral water deposits can be found practically all over Poland. The less polluted mineral waters are and the deeper underground they are located, the more salubrious effect they have on human health.²⁸

22 Valtteri Hongisto, Johanna Varjo, David Oliva, Annu Haapakangas, and Evan Benway, "Perception of Water-Based Masking Sounds: Long-Term Experiment in an Open-Plan Office," *Frontiers in Psychology* 2017, no. 8, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01177>.

23 Yong, Pyoung, Jin, and Jian, "Acoustical Characteristics."

24 Alex Dimitriu, "For ADHD, White Noise Could Be an Alternative to Medication: Broadband Background Noise Can Have a Positive Effect on a Disordered Brain," *Psychology Today*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/psychiatry-and-sleep/202305/adhd-white-noise-could-be-an-alternative-to-medication> [accessed 20.11.2023]; see also Hung-Yu Lin, "The Effects of White Noise on Attentional Performance and On-Task Behaviors in Preschoolers with ADHD," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2022, no. 19 (22), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192215391>.

25 Shoaib Ghasemi, Fatermeh Fasih-Ramandi, Mohammad Monazzam, and Soheila Khodakarim, "White Noise and Its Potential Applications in Occupational Health: A Review," *Iran Journal of Public Health* 2013 (March), no. 52 (3), pp. 488–499, <https://doi.org/10.18502/ijph.v52i3.12132>.

26 Anthony Angwin, Wayne Wilson, Wendy Arnott, Anabelle Signorini, Robert J. Barry, and David A. Copland, "White Noise Enhances New Word Learning in Healthy Adults," *Scientific Reports* 2017, no. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-13383-3>.

27 Göran B.W. Söderlund, Jakob Åsberg Johnels, Bodil Rothén, Ellen Torstensson-Hultberg, Andreas Magnusson, and Linda Fälth, "Sensory White Noise Improves Reading Skills and Memory Recall in Children with Reading Disability," *Brain and Behavior* 2021, no. 11 (7), <https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.2114>.

28 Tadeusz Wojtaszek, "Profilaktyczno-zdrowotne działanie wód mineralnych," *Journal of Elementology* 2006, nr 11 (1), pp. 119–126.

The composition of water varieties was studied as early as in the 18th and 19th centuries in order to identify curative substances in them.²⁹ The beneficial nature of water was and still is associated with its chemical composition, as explained by David Ferson, who clarifies that water can only be defined as mineral if it contains at least 500 milligrams of mineral components in one liter of liquid, while “water comprising over 1000 milligrams of salts is classified as non-potable but suitable for bathing.”³⁰

Medicinal waters come in a wide range of varieties, containing multiple minerals, such as sulfur, calcium, arsenic, silicas, and radon. Mineral waters must include at least one of a long list of components: magnesium, calcium, chlorides, potassium, sulfites, fluorides, iodides, iron, natural carbon dioxide, lithium, bromine, or radon. Importantly, “the mineral components in water have health-related effects on the organism, provided that their quantity amounts to at least 15% of the recommended daily intake.”³¹ Needless to say, these mineral ingredients significantly affect the taste and smell of water.

Mineral water springs tend to contain several combinations of various chemical elements. Depending on the classification, springs are divided into: saline, thermal, gaseous, non-gaseous, and iron.³²

Water-drinking therapy, or crenotherapy, denotes “the ingestion of spa water for a defined period in certain dosages, at prescribed times and in correlation with meals and water temperature.”³³ This is supposed to exert a favorable influence on the body: “The drinking of curative water has topical effects, impacting the digestive system in terms of excretive action and intestinal passage. Besides, crenotherapy has more general effects through supplementation with macro- and micro-ingredients from water and causing overall adaptive responses.”³⁴

Undoubtedly, water and the components it comprises have salutary properties, but it is also water-drinking as such (not necessarily involving mineral water) that beneficially influences our body functions. Water ingestion is a good practice, and people need to be reminded of that. There are at least two aspects to it. One is that we must make sure we consume enough water, and the other is that water-drinking has its environmental facets; specifically, we should rely on reusable bottles and flasks and use water dispensers, whose accessibility both at schools and in other public spaces is increasing. At some schools, water-drinking

29 The kinds of healing water will be discussed in more detail in the section on aqua-touch.

30 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 31.

31 Wojtaszek, “Profilaktyczno-zdrowotne działanie wód mineralnych,” p. 120.

32 The categorization proposed by Walter McClellan, qtd. in Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 31.

33 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 109.

34 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 60.

is practiced at the beginning of every lesson, which improves the general functions of organisms, impacts memory and focus, and boosts cognitive processes. For its part, dehydration can be damaging to every organism.³⁵

Drinking the recommended daily amount of water can not only influence the overall condition of the body, but also, specifically, minimize the risk of arterial hypertension. Research has shown that there is a statistically significant correlation between the quantity of water one drinks daily and hypertension: “fifty out of fifty-nine (84.75%) people undergoing treatment for hypertension ingested less than 0.75 liters of water a day. Fifty-one out of fifty-five (92.73%) people who did not suffer from this condition drank more than 0.75 liters of water every day.”³⁶

The touch of water

As a variety of climate-therapeutic interventions,³⁷ water-based treatments include, for example, baths, thalassotherapy (using the healing qualities of the sea³⁸), and balneotherapy that relies on natural medicinal materials: spa waters, peloids,³⁹ and gases.⁴⁰

Balenological procedures stimulate the regeneration of the organism, capitalizing on its own resources, and improve the functions of several physiological systems, an outcome not achievable by pharmacological means alone. By applying balneotherapy, it is possible to increase the fitness and non-specific immunity of the body and to normalize psycho-somatic processes. Water can

35 Clement Asogwa and Daniel Lai, “A Review on Opportunities to Assess Hydration in Wireless Body Area Networks,” *Electronics*, 2017, no. 6 (4), pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronic6040082>; Ilona Idasiak-Piechocka, “Odwodnienie – patofizjologia i klinika,” *Forum Neurologiczne* 2012, nr 5 (1), p. 73–78.

36 Kinga Bandoła, Klaudia Bandoła, Mariola Janiszewska, Agnieszka Barańska, and Ewa Zablocka, “Analiza wybranych aspektów życia osób zdrowych oraz leczących się na nadciśnienie tętnicze,” in *Tradycji Ta Nowi Naukowi Strategie i V Centralnyj Ta Sxhidnijj Evropej Materijali Mijznarodnoj Naukovo-Prakticnoj Konferecijj, 29–30 Czervja 2018 R. M. Kijiv*, ed. С.К. Бурма (Київ: Інститут інноваційної о світи, 2018), pp. 141–145, <https://povao.svita.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ScStrCEEur-Kyiv-June2018.pdf#page=149> [accessed 12. 11. 2023].

37 Magdalena Kuchcik, Krzysztof Błażejczyk, Jakub Szmyd, Paweł Milewski, Anna Błażejczyk, and Jarosław Baranowski, eds., *Potencjał leczniczy klimatu Polski* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie SEDNO, 2013).

38 Irena Ponikowska, “Podstawy kliniczne balneologii i medycyny fizykalnej,” *Służba Zdrowia* 2001, nr 63–66, pp. 3058–3061.

39 Peloid therapy means treatment by means of natural muds.

40 Sławomir Jandziś, Stanisław Zaborniak, and Angelika Pleśniak, “Z tradycji wodolecznictwa we Lwowie przed 1914 r.,” *Przegląd Medyczny Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego* 2015, nr 13(2), pp. 187–197, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15584/przmed.2015.2.12>.

produce analgesic, anti-inflammatory, anti-edematous, and hemodynamic effects.⁴¹ Irena Ponikowska lists guidelines followed by spa treatment facilities and the types of water-based practices they implement, including:

- 1) balneotherapy based on mineral waters (baths, inhalations, irrigations, and massages);
- 2) balneotherapy based on medicinal mud;
- 3) thalassotherapy;
- 4) hydrotherapy (various types of baths, massages, showers, water jets, hoses, and rinsings⁴²);
- 5) thermotherapy (baths, saunas, bathhouses);
- 6) electrotherapy (galvanic bath).

From the very beginning of balneotherapeutic cures onward, caution was exercised in the application of these interventions, and the water used in them was controlled and tested.⁴³ Initially, this form of treatment was proposed exclusively to adults. Professional facilities offering such treatments to children were first established in the 19th century. In Poland, those included institutions at Rymanowa, Ciechocinek, and later Rabka.⁴⁴ Early on, the procedures using the healing properties of water for children were often neither safe nor pleasant, because of the taste and the composition of waters and/or the temperature of baths.⁴⁵

Today, there are forty-three spa resorts in Poland,⁴⁶ and, according to the data of Statistics Poland (Polish: *Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS*), there were 258 spa treatment facilities in Poland at the end of 2021, which provided services for 599.9 thousand spa clients over the year, whereof 529.9 thousand were in stationary treatment. The GUS reports that the number of both facilities and patients has been on the decrease in recent years.⁴⁷

41 Jadwiga Helbin, “Środowiskowe czynniki fizyczne mające wpływ na organizm człowieka,” in *Wybrane problemy higieny i ekologii człowieka*, ed. Emilia Kolarzyk (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2008), pp. 82–92.

42 There are hot and ice showers, water jets, and underwater massages. For more information, see Helbin, “Środowiskowe czynniki fizyczne,” pp. 79–80.

43 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, pp. 32–33.

44 Jarosław Kita, “Peregrynacje dzieci do dziewiętnastowiecznych kurortów,” in *Świat dziecka*, ed. Jarosław Kita and Maria Korybut-Marciniak (Łódź and Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego and Instytut Historii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2016), pp. 35–46.

45 Beata Krusiec-Świdergoń and Magdalena Kamińska, “Balneoterapia w pediatrii,” *Państwo i Społeczeństwo*, 2023, nr 1, p. 114.

46 Helbin, “Środowiskowe czynniki fizyczne,” p. 83.

47 Główny Urząd Statystyczny, <https://stat.gov.pl/wyszukiwarka/szukaj.html?query=uzdrowiskowy> [accessed 6.11.2023].

The spa waters used in Poland are divided into the saline (chloride-sodium), chloride-iodine, bicarbonate, sulfite-sulfide, and alkaline categories.⁴⁸ Healing water is used as a cure in a number of conditions and illnesses and also for preventive, relaxing, and health-boosting purposes. Apart from drinking and bathing, spa water is administered through inhalation (aerosol therapy) and irrigation as well. Below, I offer an overview of varieties of healing water and their applications.

Balneotherapy tends to rely on chloride-sodium water (saline), which should contain at least 15 g of NaCl per liter. Besides, it can also contain other ions, such as iodine, bromine, and/or iron.⁴⁹ Such water is produced through the lixiviation of rock salt deposits or of marine sedimentary rocks.⁵⁰ Saline water is used to prepare baths at the concentration of 1.5%–6%. Such procedures are primarily effective in the treatment of osteoarthritis, spinal degeneration, skin diseases, some conditions of the nervous system, and circulatory disorders. They are also administered to children with rheumatism and skin conditions.

Saline baths have long been recommended for the improvement of general health outcomes, and since the very beginning they have also been prescribed by doctors as medical treatments,⁵¹ which were usually arranged in deliberately sequenced series of procedures, determined in terms of the chemical composition of water and the duration and frequency of baths. As early as in the 19th century, studies were carried out to establish the salutary efficacy of saline baths. It was found that they could be beneficial in treating gastrointestinal tract disorders, scrofulous conditions (rashes, ulcers, eye and nasal inflammations, etc.⁵²), skin conditions, nervous and psychosomatic disorders, and also obstructions of abdominal viscera, hemorrhoidal complaints (piles), insomnia, and migraine-related pain. Saline baths were also used in curing a range of emotional conditions, such as hysteria, hypochondria, apoplexy, and functional paralysis. They were also recommended for arthritic conditions,⁵³ rheumatism, pulmonary diseases, obesity, rickets (undernourishment of the skeletal system resulting in an incapacity or deficiency of the musculoskeletal system), and genital diseases (including sexually transmitted ones, e.g., gonorrhoea).

Another type of water, bicarbonate water contains at least 1,000 mg of natural carbon dioxide per one liter. Processes taking place in volcanic events are the most frequent source of CO₂. Carbonic acid baths primarily work on the car-

48 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 110.

49 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 99.

50 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 100.

51 Feliks Boczkowski, *O Wieliczce pod względem historii naturalnej, dziejów i kąpieli* (Bochnia: Nakładem i drukiem Wawrzyńca Piza, 1843), p. 97.

52 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, pp. 120–125.

53 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, pp. 105–106.

diovascular system (including ischemic disorders of various etiologies), because capillaries dilate during the procedure, the skin becomes well vascularized, blood pressure decreases, coronary blood flow and diuresis improve, and the evacuation of sodium and potassium increases.⁵⁴ Carbonic acid balneotherapeutic interventions are used in the treatment of hypertension, ischemic diseases, functional heart diseases, polyneuropathy, psychosomatic syndromes, and venous insufficiency.⁵⁵

Sulfite-sulfide waters, as another variety of mineral waters, are created “deep underground, when low-mineralized waters, especially acidic ones, are saturated with hydrogen sulfide.”⁵⁶ This kind of water boosts immunity and has analgesic, anti-allergic, anti-bacterial, and anti-inflammatory effects. Medicinal sulfite-sulfide baths are applied in the treatment of heavy-metal poisonings, skin conditions, arterial hypertension, ischemia, post-traumatic conditions of the musculoskeletal system, rheumatoid arthritis, and peripheral joint and spine osteoarthritis.⁵⁷

There are also radon waters, which are saturated with radon (with uranium as its native element, from which radium is formed). Radon waters are used, for example, in therapies of respiratory tract diseases, gynecological diseases, and rheumatic diseases in people older than forty years of age.⁵⁸

Many spa resorts in Poland also offer ozone baths, while the effects of ozone are still being studied. So far, ozone has been found to improve peripheral circulation, have atheroprotective and antithrombotic effects, and, at higher concentrations, effectively destroy viruses, fungi, and bacteria.

Mild hydrotherapeutic procedures are applied in the treatment of neuropathies, with their effectiveness depending on how well the body absorbs the active substances. It has also been shown that radon-enriched thermal water ameliorates the health status of people with allergies, chronic rhinitis, sinusitis, and asthma.⁵⁹

Researchers claim that various balneotherapeutic interventions can be effective in the treatment of a miscellaneous array of disorders, in particular those that cannot be cured by other methods. Nevertheless, experts point out that in the case

54 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 105.

55 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 106.

56 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 106.

57 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 108.

58 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 108.

59 Desiderio Passali, *Giacomo Gabelli, Giulio Cesare Passali, Ralph Mösges, and Luisa Maria Bellussi*, “Radon-enriched Hot Spring Water Therapy for Upper and Lower Respiratory Tract Inflammation,” *Otolaryngologia Polska* 2017, nr 71 (4), pp. 6–12, <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0010.2242>.

of some conditions, such as fibromyalgia, balneotherapy is relatively rarely recommended.⁶⁰

Importantly, since the onset of balneotherapy, strong emotional agitation and somatic diseases involving fever have been counted among the factors ruling out its medical application.⁶¹ Besides, there was a certain bath ethics, so to speak, which regulated behavior before taking a bath, when a special dietary regime or fasting was recommended. While taking a bath, patients were discouraged from reading books and, instead, encouraged to talk. Private body parts were supposed to be covered with cloths during the bath, and after the procedure special bathing robes, slippers, and mules were used. Depending on the kind of bath, different activities were recommended as a follow-up. After the traditional bath in a bathtub, patients were supposed to stroll outdoor for at least an hour, provided the weather was not inclement. Those taking a steam bath were told to stay at the steam room for a longer time to avoid an abrupt temperature shift.

The therapy was holistic, and a dietary regime was prescribed to accompany the bath:

After bathing, one would be well advised to have a cup of stock or a glass of port. For people with weakened digestion, caviar or herring can be a good meal to follow saline bath and whet their appetite. One should dine on ordinary dishes of beef, veal, poultry, or game, not too fatty and not too spicy [...]. Pure water or with some admixture of wine to drink. Those in need of fortification are recommended to drink Rhenish and French wine and seasoned beer.⁶²

Bathers were also advised moderate exercise, plenty of sleep, and regeneration. Besides, like today, baths using mixtures prepared outside the bathing place were to be taken with caution.

In our times, spa treatment involving a range of aqua-therapies is one of entrenched medical tendencies in clinical settings.

The therapeutic touch of water is also associated with rehabilitation and physiotherapy. Adrian Kuźdżał and Zbigniew Wroński have surveyed the literature on randomized research on the effectiveness of hydrotherapy in physiotherapy published over twenty years between 2000 and 2020.⁶³ If the beneficial effects of water-involving rehabilitation cannot be denied, the methodology of the studies they examined raised considerable doubts. The effectiveness of partial

60 Anna Binkiewicz-Glińska, Stanisław Bakula, Hanna Tomczak, Jerzy Landowski, Katarzyna Ruckemann-Dziurdzińska, Katarzyna Zaborowska-Sapeta, Ireneusz Kowalski, and Wojciech Kiebzak, "Fibromyalgia Syndrome: A Multidisciplinary Approach," *Psychiatria Polska* 2015, nr 49 (4), pp. 801–810, <https://doi.org/10.12740/psychiatriapolska.pl/online-first/4>.

61 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 129.

62 Ponikowska and Ferson, *Nowoczesna medycyna uzdrowiskowa*, p. 132.

63 Adrian Kuźdżał and Zbigniew Wroński, "Hydroterapia w fizjoterapii. Krytyczny przegląd literatury," *Physiotherapy Review* 2020, nr 24 (2), <https://doi.org/10.5114/phr.2020.103019>.

and complete immersion in pools or tubs, whirlpool baths, and interventions using water at various temperatures was investigated. The findings of researchers cited by Kuźdżał and Wroński suggest that physiotherapy in which water is applied enhances patients' quality of life, alleviates pain symptoms, and improves joint mobility.⁶⁴

Multisensorial experiences: Educational initiatives

In this section, I focus on the river, which is the thematic axis of this volume. Of course, this does not imply that other "aquatic" inspirations are negligible; rather, this means that it is a sheer impossibility to compile a complete register of initiatives they (have) prompt(ed). This is not my aim in this paper. The selection I present below is supposed to inspire readers and encourage them to develop their own "multisensorial" experiences with rivers, to engage in new encounters with them, and to reflect on transience, time, and change.

Regarded as a natural and cultural value, rivers have inspired painters, poets, and other artists.⁶⁵ They can be inspirational to educators as well, in and beyond geographical instruction. Although, as observed by Angiel, there is not enough teaching about the Vistula at school (and even less teaching by the Vistula),⁶⁶ contact with nature can be a valid element of ecological and regional (including patriotic) education. In her study of second-graders at high schools in Cracow, Sandomierz, Warsaw, and Włocławek (n = 381), Angiel reports that the respondents' perceptions of the role of the Vistula ranged from inconsequential to very important, depending on their place of residence. The largest group of the respondents viewed the river in terms of its aesthetic and recreational properties. The students from Warsaw thought of it differently and mainly considered the Vistula with regard to its utility as a drinking water supply.

It seems that teaching through experience, delight, and sensation can work therapeutically and also foster values in students, help them learn about the region and local culture, shape their identities, and promote their sense of local, regional, and national belonging. If informed by understanding, empathy, and respect, the relationships established with landscapes, nature, water, and rivers stand a good chance to deepen steadily.

64 Kuźdżał and Wroński, "Hydroterapia w fizjoterapii."

65 Joanna Angiel, "Postrzeganie rzeki Wisły jako wartości przyrodniczej i kulturowej w aspekcie edukacji geograficznej," in *Doliny rzeczne. Przyroda – krajobraz – człowiek*, ed. Urszula Myga-Piątek (Sosnowiec: Komisja Krajobrazu Kulturowego Polskiego Towarzystwa Geograficznego, 2007), p. 248.

66 Angiel, "Postrzeganie rzeki Wisły."

In recent years, teaching and educational projects dedicated to Polish rivers have proliferated. This is exemplified by rich educational programs of the National Maritime Museum (Polish: *Narodowe Muzeum Morskie*) in Gdańsk, and its branches in Tczew and Kąty Rybackie, the Vistula Museum (Polish: *Muzeum Wisły*) in Wyszogród (a branch of the Mazovia Museum in Plock), the Oder Museum—Foundation of the Open Museum of Technology (Polish: *Muzeum Odry FOMT*), the City Museum Warta and Warta River (Polish: *Muzeum Miasta i Rzeki Warty*), the Pilica River Openair Museum (Polish: *Skansen Rzeki Pilicy*), and others.

Since varied and interesting education methods are applied, children and young adults⁶⁷ can both study the history of Polish rivers, harbors, and navigation and experience fieldwork during walks or cruises.⁶⁸ Besides museums, almost all big towns and cities across Poland have venues and agencies that can promote conversations on rivers. Those include ecological education centers, which disseminate information on the natural resources of the region and the immediate surroundings.⁶⁹ Some facilities of this kind offer free admission.

Cruises and walks along rivers have become popular educational activities.⁷⁰ They are organized all over Poland, and relevant examples range from walks in the treetops in Pomiechówek combined with trips into the Wkra Valley Park,⁷¹ to walks by the rivers Drwinka⁷² and Wieprz,⁷³ to walks in the interfluvial areas, such as the educational walks around the Hołda nature reserve.⁷⁴

Educational activities also comprise specialized hydrological walks guided by researchers who share their passion with the participants. Some interesting in-

67 There are activities designed for preschoolers, primary school students, and young adults. Activities adjusted to the needs of people with disability are also offered.

68 For more details of the educational projects, see <https://nmm.pl/lekcje-muzealne>, <https://muzeumwyszogrod.pl/zbiory>, <https://www.fomt.pl/index.php/oferta/szkola-w-miescie>, https://gminawarta.pl/55-muzeum_miasta_i_rzeki_warty, <http://skansenpilicy.pl> [accessed 20.11.2023].

69 See, for example, the Ecological Education Center in Brodnica, <http://portal.muzeum.brodnica.pl/centrum-edukacji-ekologicznej/214>; the Słupia Valley Ecological Education Center, <https://dolinaslupi.pl/centrum-edukacji-ekologicznej-słupia-rzeka-wiedzy>; and Ecological Education Center in Skoczów, <https://www.podrozeklasa.pl/atrakcje-turystyczne-dla-wycieczek-szkolnych/atrakcje-turystyczne-dla-wycieczek-szkolnych-2/slaskie/item/762-centrum-edukacji-ekologicznej-w-skoczowie> [accessed 20.11.2023].

70 <https://bramapoznania.pl/cykl/rzeka-zywa-2022> [accessed 20.11.2023].

71 The Wkra Valley is situated forty kilometers away from Warsaw. For more information, see <https://modanamazowsze.pl/park-dolina-wkry-w-pomiechowku-spacery-edukacyjne-w-koronach-drzew> [accessed 20.11.2023].

72 <https://www.swietostworzenia.pl/archiwum/przyroda-miasta/916-rodzinne-spacery-edukacyjne-refa> [accessed 20.11.2023].

73 <https://parki.lubelskie.pl/aktualnosci/dzien-krajobrazu-w-nadwieprzanskim-parku-krajobrazowym> [accessed 20.11.2023].

74 <https://parkilodzkie.pl/aktualnosci/2532-spacer-edukacyjny-wokol-rezerwatu-holda-jesien-2023> [accessed 20.11.2023].

stances are hydro-morphological walks by the Vistula and the Leśna River⁷⁵ and ornithological walks by the Sekówka River,⁷⁶ which are part of the *A River Is Not a Thing* project (Polish: *Rzeka nie jest rzeczą*⁷⁷).

Outdoor games and workshops are held as well.⁷⁸ The range of activities offered by various institutions is multifarious and opulent.

Water and rivers can be an inspiration and a starting point for developing teaching innovations.⁷⁹ Andrzej Pomykalski defines innovation as “a process encompassing all operations connected to the devising and implementation of an idea.”⁸⁰ In the educational context, innovation has been defined by Wincenty Okoń, who regards it as “change in the structure of the schooling (teaching, educational) system as a whole or change in the structures of its important components. It aims to improve the work of teachers and students, curricula, and material conditions.”⁸¹ Teaching (instructional) innovation has been studied by Tadeusz Karwat, who notes that it “improves the teaching-learning process and can concern any element of education, learning outcomes and content, principles and methods of work, the means applied, and the organizational forms of instruction (e.g., problem-based teaching).”⁸² Barbara Dudel argues that innovation has measurable effects, prompts students to take action, helps remodel their beliefs and attitudes, facilitates collaboration with the community, and promotes teachers’ development, including commitment to self-development, agency, and creative approach.⁸³

75 <https://www.hajnowka.pl/wydarzenie/4144-spacer-hydrologiczny-nad-rzeka-lesna> [accessed 20.11.2023].

76 <https://otop.org.pl/2023/06/29/spacer-hydromorfologiczny-nad-rzeka-wel> [accessed 20.11.2023]; <https://otop.org.pl/2023/07/13/spacer-ornitologiczny-nad-rzeka-sekowka> [accessed 20.11.2023].

77 In Polish, *rzeka* (river) and *rzecz* (thing) begin with identical-sounding syllables; the title of the project plays on this similarity to insist that, despite it, rivers are not mere objects. (translator’s note)

78 <https://pomorskieparki.pl/aktualnosci-14/ext-1-akcja-edukacyjna-urzeczeni-wda> [accessed 20.11.2023].

79 <https://spbemowopiskie.edupage.org/a/projekty-i-innowacje?eqa=dGV4dD10ZXh0L3RleH QyNyZzdWJwYWdlPTU%3D> [accessed 20.11.2023].

80 Quoted in Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek, “Znaczenie wiedzy jako istotnego komponentu kompetencji twórczych w generowaniu innowacji,” in *Psychologia twórczości. Nowe horyzonty*, eds. Stanisław Leon Popek, Ryszarda E. Bernacka, and Cezary W. Domański (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009), p. 194.

81 Wincenty Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny* (Warszawa: PWN, 1996), p. 101.

82 Tadeusz Karwat, *Podstawy innowatyki w oświacie* (Kalisz: CDN, 1987), p. 11.

83 Barbara Dudel, Marta Kowalczyk-Wałędzia, Katarzyna Maria Łogwiniuk, Katarzyna Szorc, and Urszula Wróblewska, *Innowacje w teorii i praktyce edukacyjnej na przykładzie województwa podlaskiego* (Białystok: Fundacja Centrum Transferu Wiedzy i Innowacji Społeczno-Pedagogicznych, 2014), p. 60, <https://old.noe.uwb.edu.pl/files/file/PDF/PUBLIKACJE/Innowacje.pdf> [accessed 6.11.2023].

The first innovation I discuss in this paper is Operation Clean River (Polish: *Operacja Czysta Rzeka*).⁸⁴ In 2018, the editors of the journal *Kraina Bugu* [*The Bug River Land*] came up with the idea of cleaning the Bug River and its tributaries. The campaign invited remarkable interest from the media, volunteers, and public personages; as a result, its compass and timeframe were expanded, converting a single spontaneous action into a several-week-long nationwide event. In 2023, the event was held for the fifth time, becoming the largest coordinated project of cleaning the waterside of Polish rivers. The report of the 2022 event related: “[S]o far, more than 15,000 people accompanied us in the cleaning action over the four Operation Clean River events, removing more than 500 tons of garbage and waste from riverbanks.”⁸⁵ Besides its central action, Operation Clean River also involves plentiful variously themed meetings and festivals. The event is supported by celebrity ambassadors,⁸⁶ including singers and composers (e.g., Justyna Steczkowska) and poets and writers (e.g., Andrzej Stasiuk), who record short spots encouraging people from all age groups to take part in the cleaning of riverbanks. Volunteers can register via an online form and join a cleaning team in their neighborhood.

Educational projects and activities are an integral part of Operation Clean River. They are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Educational projects and initiatives within Operation Clean River

	By the River round the Year	E-waste	Clean River Haven
Aims	“The project aims to foster ecological sensibility, mindfulness of nature, and environment-friendly attitudes in young people.”	Education on how to deal with e-waste, including presentation of the rights and duties of the users of electronic devices, which become e-waste when disposed of.	Taking care of the surroundings and promoting ecological leisure forms.
Target group	4 th –7 th graders of primary schools, members of natural-science and volunteer clubs	All those interested.	Riverside water equipment rentals

84 For more details, see <https://operacjarzeka.pl/idea-i-historia> [accessed 10.11.2023].

85 *Operacja Czysta Rzeka 2022: Raport*, p. 23, <https://operacjarzeka.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Raport-Operacja-Czysta-Rzeka-2022.pdf> [accessed 5.11.2023].

86 On the ambassadors of the program, see <https://operacjarzeka.pl/ambasadorzy> [accessed 5.11.2023].

Table 1 (Continued)

	By the River round the Year	E-waste	Clean River Haven
Activities proposed within the project	Theoretical and practical educational activities, outdoor games, tours of the Hydropolis Ecological Education Center in Wrocław.	Educational materials: a movie and presentation on e-waste.	Riverbank cleaning events, joint promotion of environmental care

* For more particulars of the project, see <https://operacjarzeka.pl/rok-nad-rzeka> [accessed 6. 11. 2023].

Another interesting educational program has been implemented by WWF Poland. The mission of the WWF River Guardians project (Polish: *Strażnicy Rzek WWF*) is to encourage children, students, and teachers to cultivate close relations with nature—with rivers. As part of the project, the Children’s River Enchantment action (Polish: *Niech rzeka dzieci urzeka*)⁸⁷ revolves around education, sensitization, and the promotion of pro-climate attitudes and empathy for the planet. Free collections of river-themed educational materials can be downloaded from the website of the action.⁸⁸ The initiators encourage engaging students in educational practices that offer direct contact with nature. The instructional materials “compile knowledge on geography, plants, and animals, the ways rivers affect people, and the roles of rivers in nature. They show the current hazards that rivers confront and guidelines on how to support rivers.”⁸⁹

A handbook consisting of worksheets can be a source of inspiration for younger children and their parents and can be used both as part of organized educational activities and during informal outings and walks. One of the interesting activities proposed by this educational aid resource is producing a lapbook which children can make on their own or with help from adults. Basically, children are supposed to use copybooks (preferably A4 copybooks) to come up with their own, original works, which are expected to grow as children acquire new knowledge. The “lapbooks” can contain children’s own drawings, collections, and notes, along with the content of the WWF worksheets. The materials provided use games, mathematical riddles, and logical puzzles to convey a range of educational information. Some worksheets, such as *Four seasons of the year by*

87 The Polish name of the action includes untranslatable play on words pivoting on the similarity of *rzeka* (river) and *urzezać* (to enchant). (translator’s note)

88 https://www.wwf.pl/sites/default/files/inline-files/WWF_-_KARTY_PRACY_FINAL_2021.pdf?utm_source=Geberit&utm_medium=Karty%20Straznikow&utm_campaign=marzec%202021 [accessed 6. 11. 2023].

89 <https://straznicy.wwf.pl/niech-rzeka-dzieci-urzeka-wyrusz-na-niesamowita-przygode> [accessed 6. 11. 2023].

the river (Polish: *Cztery pory roku nad rzeką*),⁹⁰ *Who has walked this way* (Polish: *Kto tędy szedł*),⁹¹ and *Riverside plants* (Polish: *Rośliny nad rzeką*),⁹² can be used as inspiration during walks. Besides, worksheets can be used to play river-themed bingo and old maid games. Worksheets 27.2: *Rivers in classic painting* (Polish: *Rzeki na obrazach mistrzów*) propose drawing on rivers in arts therapy by exposure to and interaction with art. Among the artworks reproduced in worksheets are, for example, Auguste Renoir's *The Blue River*, Aleksander Gierymski's *Sand Diggers*, Adam van Breen's *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*, and Józef Chełmoński's *Landscape with a River*. The worksheet users are supposed to reflect in-depth on the paintings.

Another educational program is founded on the idea of river adoption, which was introduced by the Gaja Club in 2005.⁹³ In her study of river-related geographical education, Angiel explains that:

The program aims to inspire children and young adults to engage in pro-environmental pursuits for the sake of local rivers and protect them against pollution. This also involves finding out which individuals have the condition of rivers as part of their official responsibilities (e.g., by visiting the municipality) and collaborating with them in river-focused activities that lie within children's capacity. To adopt a river entails taking care of it and acting as its guardian angel.⁹⁴

Besides large-scale projects and campaigns, inspiration can be derived from methods of education by, for and on rivers, which are extensively inventoried by Angiel.⁹⁵ The methods should be adjusted to group- and individual work and to particular learning settings. They are varied and include (field and participant) observation, measurements, posters, essays, mind maps, drama, discussions, Oxford debates, decision trees, timelines, interviews, bingo, case studies, reports, photo-stories, presentations, educational projects, and (mostly regional) contests (e.g. *Along the Vistula Competition: Or, the Role of the River in my Hometown*,⁹⁶ contests for a river-inspired calendar: *Colors of the River and Riparian Landscapes* and *Our River in Various Guises*,⁹⁷ and interviewing local residents on their views concerning rivers).

Angiel concludes her catalogue with a poignant observation:

90 Worksheets 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3 [accessed 6.11.2023].

91 Worksheets 13, 13.1, and 13.2 [accessed 6.11.2023].

92 Worksheets 16.1, and 16.2 [accessed 6.11.2023].

93 <https://klubgaja.pl/dzialamy-dla-ziemi/dla-rzek-i-wody/zaadoptuj-rzeke> [accessed 27.02.2024].

94 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 144.

95 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, pp. 132–133.

96 For more information, see Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 139.

97 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 142.

“Geography with a human face” is still absent from school-based geographical education, which hardly applies the geographical-humanistic approach. It is really worth its while to look into one’s closest river (literally and metaphorically!) and to perceive its human face. It is also worth its while to give a thought to rivers and discover how important they are in our lives and how many forgotten values they bear. Then, it is worth its while to evoke rivers in school and university geographical and axiological education and become their advocate.⁹⁸

Emphatically, children and young adults are fond of the natural world and keen on discovering it, with hydrologically themed teaching innovation offering interesting opportunities for expanding students’ knowledge and sensitizing them to the problem of the pollution of water and other natural resources.⁹⁹

Multisensorial experiences of waterscape through various activities and projects can without a doubt translate into measurable benefits. They not only augment people’s health resources, but also raise their ecological and civic consciousness. Research has amply shown that proximity to water (oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, etc.) beneficially affects people’s physical and mental health, and that the dissemination and consumption rates of antidepressants are lower in such areas.¹⁰⁰

In order to experience a sound, empathetic, respect-underpinned, and understanding-based encounter with a river, youngsters (whether preschoolers, teenagers, or young adults) need guides, inspirators, or initiators. Historically, the river-human relationship has considerably metamorphosed, with the recent changes involving an increased acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the river and respect for its rights. This is a major shift in the narrative which is unfolding as we are talking of it.¹⁰¹ Another shift is taking place in the teaching discourse on the river. Education for values, particularly in outdoor activities, can be of key relevance to fostering conscious and responsible interaction with nature in

98 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 167.

99 For examples of river-related teaching innovation, see <https://www.edukacja.edux.pl/p-50332-innowacja-pedagogiczna-tajemnice-wody.php>, <https://www.pp4lask.com.pl/2-uncategorised/966-cztery-zywioly-innowacja-pedagogiczna-programowo-metodyczna.html>, <https://sp11lub.on.szkolnastrona.pl/p,255,innowacja-pedagogiczna-woda-cenniejsza-niz-zloto>, and <https://spkocierzew.pl/innowacja-pedagogiczna-z-edukacji-przyrodniczej-klasa-2a.html> [accessed 8. 11. 2023].

100 Craig W. McDougall, Nick Hanley, Richard S. Quilliam, Phil J. Bartie, Tony Robertson, Michael Griffiths, and David M. Oliver, “Neighborhood Blue Space and Mental Health: A Nationwide Ecological Study of Antidepressant Medication Prescribed to Older Adults,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 2021, no. 214, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2021.104132>. See also Carmen Keijzer, “Green and Blue Spaces and Physical Functioning in Older Adults: Longitudinal Analyses of the Whitehall II Study,” *Environment International* 2019, no. 122, pp. 346–356, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2018.11.046>.

101 For the history of human-river relationships, see Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, p. 85.

general and with rivers in particular. Teachers are being encouraged to inspire and initiate discussions, ask profound questions, take students into the field, be mindful of students' needs (and their cognitive and emotional readiness for learning), teach how to experience the world multisensorially, transpose experience onto other forms, share their own experiences, abandon lecturing, teach how to explore things, trigger positive emotions, be authentic and empathetic, undermine the anthropocentric perception of rivers, promote biocentrism, serve as models of being a friend and guardian of rivers, and present rivers as teachers holding subject positions and as the best teaching means.¹⁰²

Inter- and intra-psychical experiences: The river of life metaphor¹⁰³

In the *kawa* model (in Japanese *kawa* means a river), which was developed by Michael Iwama, the river is a metaphor for human life, being the self and life-course of the individual.¹⁰⁴ Birth is the beginning of the river, and death is where the river spills into the sea. The current, watercourse, depth, and other features of the river mirror the specificities of human life. Iwama insists that people must be analyzed in their relations with the surroundings, since the human being and the environment exert mutual influence on each other, which is formative of them both. Initially, the *kawa* model was thought of as essentially epitomizing Eastern culture,¹⁰⁵ but, with time, its supra-cultural quality was recognized. Edyta Janus

102 Angiel, *Rzeki i ich wartości w edukacji geograficznej*, pp. 111–112.

103 The river of life metaphor is of course not the only river metaphor. Literature and culture abound with popular aquatic metaphors, including water as symbolizing the passage of time, road, challenges, purification, change, transformation, renewal, rebirth, destruction, devastation, flooding, wiping off, erasure, and many others. For a philosophical account of water metaphors, see Daniel Roland Sobota, "Na szerokich wodach filozofii: Kilka przykładów metafor akwaticznych, które odnoszą się do najważniejszych pojęć filozoficznych," *Akademia: Magazyn Polskiej Akademii Nauk* 2020, nr 2 (62), pp. 15–17, https://journals.pan.pl/Content/117633/PDF/15-17_Sobota_Woda_pol.pdf [accessed 6.02.2024]. Humanists have comprehensively studied the river/rivers from interdisciplinary perspectives. For in-depth discussions, see Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak, eds., *Urzeczenie. Loce literatury i wyobraźni* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), and Jacek Kolbuszewski, "Szczęście wiosłem wyliczone. Motyw rzeki w myśleniu symbolicznym i literaturze," in *Rzeki. Kultura – cywilizacja – historia*, vol. 1, ed. Jerzy Kułtuniak (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 1992), pp. 39–63. There are also multiple studies exploring the spiritual aspect of water; see, e.g., Wojciech Pikor, *Soteriologiczna metafora wody w "Księżce Izajasza"* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2009).

104 Michael Iwama, *The Kawa Model: Culturally Relevant Occupational Therapy* (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone Elsevier, 2006).

105 Michael Iwama, Nicole Thomson, and Rona Macdonald, "The Kawa Model: The Power of Culturally Responsive Occupational Therapy," *Disability and Rehabilitation* 2009, no. 31 (14), pp. 1125–1135, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09638280902773711>.

observes that “attempts to apply the model in various parts of the world have shown how powerfully culture impacts the ways the model is used and its elements are made sense of.”¹⁰⁶ Janus proposes employing the *kawa* model in occupational therapy in Poland.

In their discussion of the *kawa* model, Jayme Ober, Rebecca Newbury, and Jennifer Lape elucidate that it holds that a person’s entire life path matters and that interplays of various elements are crucial to it. The following elements are presented and explored¹⁰⁷:

- a) the river, which is the central metaphor in the *kawa* model. The river is a metaphor for human life;
- b) riverbanks are a symbolic equivalent of interactions with others and the environment;
- c) rocks are obstacles and challenges in life; they can be physical, emotional, and/or financial difficulties;
- d) driftwood stands for resources: one’s strengths that help one cope with adversity;
- e) space between rocks correspond to opportunities and readiness for development, one’s adaptive potential;
- f) flotsam and jetsam refer to cultural aspects, external factors, and relations;
- g) turbulences mean crises, disruptions, and hardships;
- h) the water level symbolizes the individual’s overall mood and immunity; fluctuations of this level reflect physical and emotional changes.

The *kawa* model can be used in therapy to motivate individuals to change, help them build a life worth living, and promote deeper insight.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The array of water-based therapeutic interventions is variegated, and its prolific opportunities are captivating. In this paper, the therapeutic power of directly and indirectly experienced aquatic landscape was first asserted. Its salutary effect on healthy individuals and patients was affirmed, and it was cited as supporting the rehabilitation of inmates in penitentiaries. The

106 Edyta Janus, “Model KAWA w procesie terapii zajęciowej i możliwości jego wykorzystania w rehabilitacji pacjenta z zaburzeniami psychicznymi,” *Postępy Rehabilitacji* 2007, nr 1, pp. 27–36, <https://doi.org/10.1515/rehab-2015-0059>.

107 Jayme Ober, Rebecca Newbury, and Jennifer Lape, “The Dynamic Use of the Kawa Model: A Scoping Review,” *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* 2022 (Spring), no. 10 (2), <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1952>.

108 Janus, “Model KAWA.” Iwama, Thomson, and Macdonald, “The Kawa Model.”

sounds of water are soothing; since they reduce stress and tension, they can be components of active and passive music therapy. They are effective both in the direct and in the mediated form (VR). Subsequently, the role of crenotherapy and the healing dimension of (mineral and common) water-drinking were highlighted. The touch of water in which one is enveloped is the basis of balneotherapy with its broad range of procedures for multiple conditions. Spa-based water treatments were also discussed. This catalogue of applications was capped with an outline of the *kawa* model, where the river is a metaphor for life.

The therapeutic potential of water—or, more narrowly, of rivers—exemplifies the possibility of tapping into the national, regional, and local resources of nature and the natural environment.

The “aquatic treasury of opportunities” can be capitalized on to make the educational process more appealing (irrespective of whether some solutions are used by parents, teachers, or educators), to help students develop responsible attitudes, empathy, and sensibility, and to expand their view of riverscapes. Besides, interaction (no matter whether virtual, imaginary, artistic, or physical) with water and river landscapes enhances physical health, augments mental health, and helps develop resources and balance.¹⁰⁹ The awareness of multiple pro-health advantages of water can translate into changed attitudes of children, students, and adults.

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109 See Maedhbh McNamara, Ailise Murphy, Fiona Dowler, and Ronan Foley, “Blue Spaces as Resources for Health and Wellbeing: Survey Comparisons of Indoor and Outdoor Settings from Ireland,” *Revista de Estudios Andaluces* 2020, no. 39, pp. 8–22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/rea.2020.i39.01>.

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Abstract

The paper discusses the potential of water as one of the natural resources. The exploration of the beneficial impacts of water is arranged by the senses: sight, taste, hearing, touch, and smell. Multisensorial, inter- and intra-psychical experiences are analyzed as well. The study is bipartite. The first part sketches the background of the argument, outlining the genesis, assumptions, and aims of water therapies from antiquity until the present day, including opportunities for and directions of future development. Attention is given to balneotherapy, strictly and broadly defined hydrotherapy (healing by means of waterscapes, contact with nature: rivers, seas and oceans, thalassotherapy, and using water sounds as a form of music therapy) and to landscape-based healing (arts therapy). The advantages and risks of these forms of therapy are discussed along with the recommended scope of their application. This is supported by a range of empirical research findings. The second part presents related inspirations for psychoeducation and education on various levels of schooling. It surveys multifarious (local, regional, and nationwide) projects that tap into

the therapeutic potential of water. The projects are discussed in terms of classic hydrotherapy (including thalassotherapy), with water used in medical spa treatments, and in terms of the acoustic and aesthetic dimensions of water (in music therapy and arts therapy, respectively). In conclusion, implications for teachers, educators, and culture animateurs are outlined, suggesting how the local hydrological potential can be utilized in teaching, psychoeducation, and therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: balneotherapy, hydrotherapy, crenotherapy, thalassotherapy, water therapy, ecological education, water.

Writing that Thinks (through) the River

The river and (if one can say that) thinking (through) the river clean language, by setting in motion, help avoid swampy stagnation, and are a chance for human survival.¹

River lines inspire. They have been, and are, used by writers as axes around which to construct their narratives and organize their stories. This practice should not come as a surprise, given that the river as such resembles a story, because it has its source, its main course, and its mouth, if for no other reason. The headwater is like an exposition as it springs from somewhere and gives something a direction. The main course of the river can be likened to the central plot of the story that rolls along or heads toward an ending. In terms of the structure of a literary narrative, the river mouth corresponds to the resolution of the action. Besides, the digressions and subplots that fuel literary storytelling can be compared to the rivers that join the main river stream as companion rivers, sister rivers, or tributaries, which, like minor plotlines, feed the major storyline.

In this context, I understand the eponymous thinking (through) the river, a notion put forward by Tadeusz Sławek, as configuring and arranging a narrative by harnessing a river (both a metaphor and an actually existing river) to a text. This may take a variety of forms in a range of practices: the river as the pivotal theme, the river as a digression, the river as an object of philosophical reflection, the river as a starting point for a poetic metaphor, and many others.

In this text, I look at selected projects that engage with the fluid, the aquatic, and the fluvial in captivating and innovative ways. I seek to find out what it is that river stories can give us (as readers and scholars) amid anthropocentric narratives and the anthropocentric world in the era of crises (including the climatic disruption).

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¹ Tadeusz Sławek, "rzekibrzeg/rzekibieg. Rzeka i jej opowieści," in *Urzeczenie. Luce literatury i wyobraźni*, eds. Mariusz Jochemczyk and Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), p. 132.

I

“The novel is a river. It’s obvious. What if the river is a novel?”² Wit Szostak wonders in his book *rumowiska* [*rubbles*]. Broached in the introduction, the idea of the river essentially being a story ties in with this observation. In this context, my attention is engrossed by two tales that I believe may be read both as novels and as essays. Their generic boundaries are fluid, which also makes them similar to things of water, things that mingle and propel.

Esther Kinsky’s *River* drifts like a river, flows with it, and is a story of the river. The main stream of the story finds its conduit in the Lea, a river on which Kinsky lives. It is here that she explores the river, discovers and tames it, and habituates to it. The river Lea triggers Kinsky’s aquatic memories, including her recollections of the most important river, her childhood river—the Rhine:

The Rhine was the first border I ever knew, and it was constantly present. It taught us what was here and what was there. “Our” side, with its village ways in relentless decline, its factories, shacks and freight trains, stood opposite the other side where the sun set. That side, remote and blurry, a hazy land of melting shapes and washed colours, provided a background to many of our family photographs.³

London’s Lea is a guide to Kinsky’s new place of living; it helps her put down roots in the area and grasp her geographical whereabouts as if enabling her to see herself in the landscape and in the map:

The river Lea, here dividing the town from open terrain, does not have a long journey. Rising among the low hills to the northwest of London, it flows through smiling countryside before reaching the frayed urban edgelands and snaking through endless suburbs. It then casts an arm around the old, untameably streetwise, commercial centre of London, and finally, eight miles southeast of Springfield Park, and as one of several solicitous tributaries from the north and west that deposit their sand and gravel at the city’s feet, flows into a Thames that is already bound for the sea.⁴

There is attentiveness and curiosity in Kinsky’s looking. The river makes her think, remember, and imagine the future, and also invites her to philosophize and digress. Among the tributaries of the German writer’s story is the Oder, with which she is connected by complex bonds. Kinsky ruminates on wandering across inappropriate places, with our hearts in tow, which she says she always realizes by rivers, and with particular acuteness by the Oder. She remembers that Kleist grew up on the Oder, and though two centuries ago the river must have looked different—broader, more expansive, with more overgrown banks and huge alluvia—the double blue of one side and the other was the same sight to him

2 Wit Szostak, *rumowiska* (Kraków: Powergraph, 2023), p. 236.

3 Esther Kinsky, *River*, trans. Iain Galbraith (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2018), p. 34.

4 Kinsky, *River*, p. 21.

as it is now, with the blue on any bank that is a border touching the thought of the heart in inappropriate places.⁵

Kinsky's story comprises many other plotlines and narratives, originating from other rivers, such as the Neretva, the Tisza, the Crișul Negru, Alb and Repede, and the Hooghly River. All this makes for a profuse register of lines on the maps by which Kinsky's life was unfolding, imagination worked, sensibility took shape, and mindfulness developed.

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is another attention-grabbing story, or a digressive novel, as I label it for the sake of sorting out narratives. When ushering readers into her tale, Dillard explicitly locates herself in space, explaining that she lives on the eponymous creek, which meanders across a dale in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. She describes her house, placed by and facing the creek, as:

a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. The creeks—Tinker and Carvin's—are an active mystery, fresh every minute. Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection.⁶

Thinking is exactly what Dillard is doing throughout the book. She ponders, she muses, she indulges in reflection; she occasionally realizes just that, and then she notes down: "I am sitting under a bankside sycamore; my mind is a slope."⁷ Dillard's is a story of a creative process, distributed across everyday experiences, whose agenda includes strolling by the river, watching the river, meeting people, watching animals (turtles, carp, bluegills, muskrats...), reading (a treatise on making a snowman, texts on subatomic particles, the outer space, and philosophy, writings by Einstein, Pliny, and Thoreau), stalking animals, contemplation, looking, listening, and activating and honing the senses. This multi-plotted and opulent story of the world, nature, and the human place in it is narratively bound together by the river. The repeated revisiting of its banks breeds reflection, triggers memories, and makes Dillard report time and again what she has just seen by the creek. The Tinker Creek also drives the work of the imagination; a ripple on the water, a slight alteration in the riverscape, a motion of an animal, a bird's sound, a change in the time of the day or the season of the year—any of these is enough to induce Dillard's associations with what has been lived through, experienced, or read and also, an interesting perspective, with what has been imagined. "These are the waters of beauty and mystery,"⁸ she writes.

5 Kinsky, *River*, p. 150.

6 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, e-book (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 5–6.

7 Dillard, *Pilgrim*, p. 93.

8 Dillard, *Pilgrim*, p. 272.

II

“The river is a metaphor. It’s obvious. What if the metaphor is a river?”⁹ Szostak continues to wonder. This insight is corroborated by language, very busy, as it is, with the river. Colloquial expressions with the river as their protagonist, which are nothing other than metaphors, abound: “You can’t step into the same river twice,” “On St. Gregory’s day, flow rivers to the sea away,”¹⁰ “The deep river doesn’t roar,” and “Don’t change horses in the middle of the river.” The metaphorical potential of rivers is also used by poets. In this part, I focus on such poetic applications. Because relevant examples are myriad (with Józef Czechowicz, Jan Kasprówic, Czesław Miłosz, and Wisława Szymborska representing but a tiny Polish sample), I only cite two poets whose work, I believe, copiously showcases what appealing, far-ranging, and profound things can be done with and around the river-theme. What I mean is inviting the river into a poetry volume not as a digression, a springboard, or an association, but as a protagonist around whom the story is constructed.

Natalie Diaz, one of my examples, devotes ample room, attention, and care to the river in her poignant poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poem*.¹¹ In his discussion of the volume in the quarterly *Czas Literatry* [*The Time of Literature*], Bartosz Wójcik observes: “Diaz mainly uses English, the language of European colonizers and the white American majority, but she also weaves into the text Mojave expressions in Chuukwar Makav, the language of ’Aha Makav (literally: water people), a native nation of which she is a member (the Mojave reservation is situated where Arizona, Nevada, and California meet).”¹² Diaz writes of the Colorado River as if she were writing of a human-like being possessed of a body: “We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.”¹³ She goes on to elucidate:

This is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not *two unlike things*—they are more than *close together* or *side by side*. They are *same*—body, being, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine.

The body is beyond six senses. Is sensual. An ecstatic state of energy, always on the verge of praying, or entering any river of movement.

Energy is a moving river moving my moving body...¹⁴

9 Szostak, *rumowiska*, p. 90.

10 The feast of St. Gregory is on 12 March, which was around the time when winter ice on the rivers would melt in Poland (before the onset of global warming). (translator’s note)

11 Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, e-book (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020).

12 Bartosz Wójcik, “Brać Aztek, siostra rzeka,” *Czas Literatry* 2024, nr 1 (25), p. 27.

13 Natalie Diaz, “The First Water Is the Body,” in *Postcolonial Love Poem*.

14 Diaz, “The First Water” (italics original).

Diaz marshals her poems to stand up for the river. She views the lot of the river as a reflection of the lot of Native Americans and minorities susceptible to persecution. It is to them that she grants the right to the river. In doing so, she knows that she gives the river, or restores it, into responsible hands, and regards it as a gesture that should entail care for the water resources:

US-headquartered companies bought the rights to water
 In other countries. These companies are
 Strangers to the gods of those waters, were not
 formed from them, have never said *Gracias* to
 those waters, never prayed to those waters,
 Have never been cleansed by those waters.¹⁵

Diaz thinks of the river as of a sister, a kin, and emphasizes the organic quality, bodiliness, and closeness of the river. Her poetic protest grows out of past experiences, history, generational transmission, and also of current critical reflection on the human exploitation of the natural resources. Diaz's poetry proposes another point of view—one that is not anthropocentric, but based on respect for other beings, including rivers. Above all, she realizes that the clean river brimming with life also means life for humans. Her poetic reflection takes her a step further to make her body a riverbed. She ponders:

If I was created to hold the Colorado River, to carry its rushing
 inside me, if the very shape of my throat, of my thighs is for
 wetness, how can I say who I am if the river is gone?

What does 'Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton
 of its fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds?

If the river is a ghost, am I?¹⁶

The stakes are high in this volume; it is about identity, the right to the river, and the recognition of it as a being worth caring for because the river is all about life. Diaz's strategy is deeply moving, particularly so when she equates her body with the river, the way she does in "The First Water Is the Body":

The Colorado Rier is the most endangered river in the United
 States—also it is a part of my body.

I carry a river. It is who I am: 'Aha Makav. This is not metaphor. [...]

Translated into English, 'Aha Makav means *the river runs through
 the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of
 our land.*¹⁷

15 Natalie Diaz, "exhibits from The American Water Museum," in *Postcolonial Love Poem*.

16 Diaz, "The First Water."

17 Diaz, "The First Water" (italics original).

These are poems of protest and power; they are angry and tender at the same time, filled with love and sisterly solidarity.

Alice Oswald, my other example, examines the river in a different manner—as a scribe, a peeper, an eavesdropper. She carefully inspects the fluvial and the aquatic that go by the name of the Dart. This is the title of one of her most important poetry collections which won her the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2002.¹⁸ A lot in her looking at the river is illuminated by her prefatory note:

This poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years, I've been recording conversations with people who know the river. I've used these recordings as life-models from which to sketch out a series of characters—linking their voices into a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea. There are indications in the margin where one voice changes into another. These do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions. All voices should be read as the river's mutterings.¹⁹

The opening lines of the poem indicate the path that language and poetic reflection will go:

Who's this moving alive over the moor?

An old man seeking and finding a difficulty.

Has he remembered his compass his spare socks

does he fully intend going in over his knees off the military track
from Okehampton?

keeping his course through the swamp spaces
and pulling the distance around his shoulders

and if it rains, if it thunders suddenly

where will he shelter looking round

and all that lies to hand is his own bones?

the source of the Dart—Cranmere

Pool on Dartmoor,

seven miles from the nearest road

tussocks, minute flies,

wind, wings, roots.²⁰

Crucially, the volume is titled after a river that runs a mere seventy-five kilometers in Devon in South West England. Oswald's strategy differs from Diaz's in that the British poet does not put herself in the spotlight in the book; instead, she withdraws to the background to let the voices of people from around the river resound, those living and those already departed, some of whose lives ended in that very river. The story of the Dart, with its poetic texture, has, I believe, an immense potential for

18 A short passage of *Dart* has been translated into Polish by Magda Heydel. The translation of the whole is work in progress. See Jerzy Jarniewicz and Magda Heydel, eds., *Poetki z wysp* (Wrocław and Gdańsk: Biuro Literackie and Instytut Kultury Miejskiej, 2015).

19 Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. v.

20 Oswald, *Dart*, p. 1.

inspiration, sensitization, and encouraging re-enactment on the rivers by which one lives.

III

“The river carries, guides, swells, subsides, floods, meanders, pushes, pulls into the deep, rolls and drags, crushes and smoothens, builds up and spills over; it is an element, it is ungraspable, it is a mystery. Surely a novel fits this description as well;”²¹ Szostak writes in *rumowiska* [*rubbles*]. All these verbs make sense in relation to the stories I canvass in this part, narratives that stretch across the books, framed as essays but also as novels. One of them is *Danube* by the Italian writer Claudio Magris, and the other is Maciej Robert’s essay titled *Rzeki, których nie ma* [*Rivers That Are Not*]. It is an interesting experience to put these two narratives side by side, with one of them spun around a powerful river that, traversing most European countries, has been a site and an agent of history and a fulcrum of culture, and the other woven around rivers, streams, and creeks that the Polish writer seeks to reclaim for memory.

Magris’ writing is erudite, digressive, and pristine. He surveys the river first and foremost as a line that has tempted and seduced so many nations to settle on it. In his explorations of the present and the past, he visits big cities, small towns, and villages. He is not really interested in issues that arrest our attention now, such as the climate crisis, the construction of dams,²² renaturization, or the conferral of legal personhood on rivers. Indeed, the time when Magris set out along the river was inherently anthropocentric (though we did not call it that back then in the 1980s). If written today, an essay on the Danube could rather poorly do without these essential concerns and without giving the voice to the river; it would likely not be limited to narrating the river through the human around it. Yet Magris’ reflection on the architecture of travel sounds intriguing: he has himself chosen the route leading him from the springs to the mouth of the river, and he is consistent in faithfully following it, but he allows a rebellion in this adventure: “It’s comforting that travel should have an architecture, and that it is possible to contribute a few stones to it, although the traveller is less like one who constructs landscapes—for that is sedentary task—than like one who destroys them.”²³

Robert’s narrative is more tender to rivers, streams, and creeks. It may be because he decided to cast as his protagonists rivers, streams, creeks, and water-

21 Szostak, *rumowiska*, p. 364.

22 Nevertheless, he is not oblivious to environmental issues, for example, addressing the hazards linked to the plans to construct a large hydro-electric plant between Vienna and Hainburg. See Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), p. 36.

23 Magris, *Danube*, p. 16.

courses that human activity had pushed down to urban undergrounds, harnessed into canals, polluted, confined, or made dry up. The story of rivers once essential for the city of Lodz and then enclosed in concrete ducts is truly moving. *Rzeki, których nie ma* [*Rivers That Are Not*] is also a digressive tale of imagined and invented rivers, as well as of those regarded as obstacles to human expansion. Robert's point of departure is provided by reflection on being a Lodz resident, a human being who dwells above walled-in rivers and does not experience their existence, humming, or dampness in daily life. In this way, room for the imagination opens up:

A river that is not may even be a more interesting place. All the more so that a river that is not may (not) be in so many different ways. For example, it may be an oxbow—a distributary cut off from a meandering river—now a small lake or a weed-overgrown bed, covered in alluvia from the wild and soggy terrain, which anyway sometimes dries to a crisp and turns into a dale. It may be a river vanishing as if it were swallowed by the ground, or one that dries up periodically or has ultimately dried out. It may be a river only preserved in historical accounts. It may be a river that forbids access, and also a river to which access is forbidden. It may be a river converted into a sewer, squeezed into a canal, buried in sand, paved with concrete, or polluted so much that it can hardly be called a river anymore. It may be an underground river. Or a river of one's dreams that one projects as an ideal to replace an indifferent original. It may be a rivulet so tiny that it is irrelevant to hydrologists and cartographers. It may be any watercourse in which we choose to see a river for ourselves only. It may be a made-up river, a literary river. What interesting things can be seen on the river that is not? Phantasy, first and foremost, and fiction, and long-forgotten glory. I like walking to such nonrivers of rivers, I like reading about them, and I also like reading them. Every river is a story, but a river that is not is a special story because the imagination must work at full throttle here, because here you must read between the lines.²⁴

Magris' and Robert's books fashion interesting idioms for talking about rivers and accompanying them. Robert's narrative already exhibits thinking inspired by concerns about the climate crisis and, consequently, more caring ideas of rivers.

IV

I guess we will not err much to conclude that there has been an aquatic turn in literature in the recent decades. The river is an alluring character and metaphor for writers. This notion is also brought up by Szostak in *rumowiska* [*rubbles*]:

Rivers constantly feed language, nourishing and fertilizing it. They are so tenacious; they pierce not by force but by steady dripping, so much so that language ultimately surrenders and cannot do without rivers. The story flows on; a stream of words; the

24 Maciej Robert, *Rzeki, których nie ma* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023), pp. 8–9.

rapid course of action; a meandering plot; cascading words; the stream of consciousness; source experience; the flow of time; fast-flowing action; [...] the river of life; stream of experiences; *wywiad rzeka*; *powieść rzeka*;²⁵ plunging or steeping oneself into history; plot twists; hitting the bottom. And finally: mainstream. Can anything be thought without the river?²⁶

I would say that something can definitely be thought without the river, yet surely thinking with and of the river regales us with compelling tropes, metaphors, and insights, as well as gripping questions? Fluvial narratives, as I see them, offer a language that we need in the age of crises—one that is tender (but not maudlin), oriented onto other beings, and recognizing the right of the non-human to live and self-determine. The river is also movement and excitement in these narratives, and, as Catherine Malabou tells us: “One cannot be without being affected. This founding observation opens a new path for neurobiology in so far as it takes into account the fundamental role of emotion in cerebral life, in other words, in the unity of the organism, the complex formed by body and spirit.”²⁷ I believe there is a special subversive power in aquatic poetic exercises, which rely on a language derived from the organic to bring us closer to rivers and closer to nature, time and again re-affirming that we are part of nature. They help me, as a writer, talk of the world more boldly, imagine more boldly, become enrooted in the world, and be a little less afraid of what is looming ahead.

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

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25 In Polish, *wywiad rzeka* (literally: river interview) is a book-length interview in which the interviewee recounts their life, work, and pursuits against a panoramic background of their times, and *powieść rzeka* (literally: river novel) is a term for a multi-generational saga. (translator’s note)

26 Szostak, *rumowiska*, p. 286.

27 Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Sheard (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), p. 22.

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Abstract

In the text, the author looks at different ways of writing about rivers. She is interested in literary looking at rivers, especially the one approaching the treatment of rivers as entities: rivers as an organism. The researcher sees this – in the era of the climate crisis—as an opportunity to build a different narrative, directed more toward the river and its needs. The language of literature overtakes the language of science or the language of the media. Treating rivers as legal entities, or thinking of them as creatures, is a work of imagination that has benefits: getting used to the element of water, giving rivers space to spill, Stopping violent treatment of rivers, renaturalization of transformed rivers, and neighbourly co-existence—people and nature.

Keywords: rivers, aqua criticism, ecocriticism, ecopoetics, tactility.

Experiencing: Aquatic Education

Małgorzata Lebda, a Polish poet, researcher, photographer, ultramarathon runner, and winner of the Gdynia Literary Prize, in conversation with Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek

Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek: What do you associate with rivers? And why?

Małgorzata Lebda: Lifeblood that powers and feeds, and if it functions well, it brings prosperity. Every single artery of such a bloodstream matters, is relevant and forms an ecosystem that is unique and useful to a given area. Rivers are the veins of the planet, I like to think.

M.W.D.: Because our conversation will be part of a book on aquatic education, I cannot possibly not ask you about your childhood aqua-memories. Was there any special river of your childhood? What memories does it evoke? Do you remember any lessons on rivers (water), and did they perhaps take place outdoors?

M.L.: The Kamienica River and the Dunajec River were the rivers of my childhood. And also the Żeleźnikowski Creek in my home village. I loved spending time by the flowing water, and, indeed, being by the water taught me a lot. Sadly, lessons on rivers didn't happen. We only had to know, as part of the general knowledge of the world, where the Vistula, the Amazon, the Nile, and the Yangtze were situated; you had to point them out right away on the cartographic map of the world. Other lessons, private, domestic ones, took place when, with siblings and cousins, we went exploring ravines, gullies, creek beds, splashing in the current. When I was a child, in the summer, I went with the cattle to the other side of the creek, grazed the animals on our grassland there, and came back with them

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in the afternoon. On the way, I would stop by the creek; they would dip their muzzles into the cold stream, and I my feet, swollen from the wellies. That creek gave a respite. But sometimes it was death, such as when animal blood from the abattoir was flushed straight into it. Our cows would halt over it and freeze; at such moments, it seemed to me that they recognized the blood of their sisters and brothers.

M.W.D.: How does it feel to experience the river with your body? Why did you choose the Vistula, rather than any other river to run along its streambed? Please, develop a bit on this, for the readers from outside Poland to learn about your project; we might explain the project in the question, but perhaps you'd rather do it yourself to highlight some specific points.

M.L.: This is a metaphysical and purely poetic experience which ignites my imagination and enroots me in the world. And yes, I spent a whole month by the body of the river, the Vistula, running the distance of 1,113 kilometers (an equivalent of twenty-eight marathons) over this time. Why? What for? For many complex reasons; I'll mention some of them. I remember my astonishment at reading a few years ago that the president of our country wanted the Vistula to be like the Yangtze. It sounded ominous to be, because that would entail investments involving the regulation of the river, paving the riverbed with concrete, taking the river away from animals and people. As the key project informed by this idea, the government is planning to construct the E40 waterway with a view to launching a massive inland navigation system in Poland. The waterway is supposed to be about 2,000 long, stretching from Kherson on the Black Sea in Ukraine to Gdansk on the Baltic Sea in Poland. As reported by OTOP, a Polish NGO committed to monitoring this matter, the construction of the waterway will affect many rivers in Europe: the Vistula, the Bug, the Pina, the Pripjat, and the Dnieper, and additionally in Poland: the Wieprz and the Tyśmienica (depending on which variant is actually implemented). As pointed out by the Save the Rivers Coalition, the timeframe and cost calculation of the venture are entirely unrealistic; the implementation of the project may cost up to 200 billion zloty, mainly coming from the public funds; the venture will increase the risk of flooding, detrimentally affect the fishing industry, and bring about the degradation of river valleys, causing a serious threat to two national parks and fourteen protected landscape areas. The data of the European Environment Agency show that CO₂ emissions in freight transport by rail are a third the volume of those in navigation, and for passenger transport the figure is eight times smaller. Briefly, it's not worth it for us, citizens. Nevertheless, the work has already commenced. OTOP reports that (before the war) Ukraine started dredging the Pripjat in the Chernobyl exclusion zone (breaching the national law and potentially releasing

nuclear waste). The NGO warns that independent research carried out by the French organization ACRO has found that “twenty-eight million people may be exposed to increased radiation risk if the dredging work is continued in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. These are populations that inhabit the area in the lower stretch of the Pripjat and depend on water from the Dnieper and on the food produced with the river water. Besides, the Pripjat and the artificial lake in Kyiv will be permanent sources of radioactive pollution, because dredging work will have to be carried out annually to maintain the E40 waterway. This would contaminate water delivered to eight million people, including Kyiv residents, while irrigation and the use of the dredged material in farming could cause the contamination of crops on which twenty million Ukrainians depend.”¹ These data are truly shocking, but when you consider the ongoing climate crisis, the predictions of rivers drying out, and the ever lowering water table, these imperial designs of politicians rather come across as grotesque and altogether misguided ideas. And so, having done research on rivers and educated myself on the agenda of these transformations, I had my imagination seized by activist thoughts. I started to think what I could do as a person who works with words, does research on a daily basis, is in touch with students, and also brings together various communities: literary, sporting, visual-arts and activist/environmental. What could be done to articulate the risk to our river clearly and bring it into spotlight? (And, crucially, it is a universal story, not only of the Vistula; it is also a tale of other rivers being destroyed worldwide; let us say the names of some of them: the Danube, the Oder, the Lužnice, the Huang He, and the Colorado.) I decided to use my own body and imagination to this end. My plan was relatively easy—to run the full length of the Vistula, staying close to its watercourse and, at the same time, keeping a diary and publishing poetic reportages in *Magazyn Pismo*.² By making this plan a reality, I expected, I would feel agency; I would give voice to the river, become its ambassador, experience, expose myself to stimuli, and inspire myself in order to be able to inspire others.

1 OTOP, “Droga wodna E40: Ukraina pogłębia Prypeć w ‘strefie wykluczenia,’” September 4, 2020, <https://otop.org.pl/2020/09/droga-wodna-e40-ukraina-poglebia-prypec-w-strefie-wykluczenia> [accessed 11.02.2024]. The English version of the ACRO study is available at https://savepolesia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ACRO_E40-waterway_Chernobyl-heritage.pdf [accessed 11.02.2024].

2 Poetic reports from the Vistula venture, complete with visual materials by Rafał Siderski, were published in the Internet journal *Pismo* (titled “Czytanie wody: Wisła” [“Reading the water: The Vistula”]). The project was a collaboration with the Pismo Foundation.

M.W.D.: Esther Kinsky wrote in her *River* that “Every river is a border; that was one of the lessons of my childhood. It informs our view of what is other, forcing us to stop in our tracks and take in the opposite side.”³ What did the river teach you?

M.L.: Being by the Vistula, and in fact all my previous beings-by, visits to, the time spent around rivers, streams, and creeks marked the period of the honing of my senses, of effort to hear the silence, rustling, and vibrations. The river can calm your mind; it helps you meditate, be in the here and now. What I learned of the river was that it was a being, an organism, and that it should have its rights. The Vistula and all the companion rivers which I passed and crossed, whose tributaries I looked at, became dear to me. I dedicated my exertions to them, but in return I got beauty, which sometimes took my breath away. I will use it, source it for writing. I’ve already begun.

M.W.D.: Did embodied being with/proximity to the river encourage expanding the language of your writing?

M.L.: It did; I’d call this experience an exposure to currents, confluents. The river is a powerful metaphor, a (plot)line that makes it possible to spin a narrative, but time and again it lets tributaries, smaller rivers enter it, as if smaller narratives flowed into it. Being smaller doesn’t mean that they are any less interesting narratives. I call these smaller rivers companion rivers, sister rivers. Since completing my run, I’ve been working on a long poem which will be part of a book Wydawnictwo Warstwy is going to publish in 2014, where the visual artist Rafał Siderski and I will rely on our Vistula adventure to talk of the river (rivers) in words (me) and in images (Rafał). As I work on the text of that poem, I come to realize that the adventure encouraged me to experiment; it left my senses and my looking sharpened. I’m more watchful, a bit like an animal.

M.W.D.: “So, water, grandma says,” in your *Łakome*. One can feel humidity in your poetry. One has an impression that it has a lot to do with things first (the poem “in praise of water”), with things that remember (“water remembers”; the grandma’s house in *Łakome* was flooded, like the entire village), with femininity (the poem “close-up: water”). Would you agree with these intuitions? Where do such connections come from?

M.L.: From my experience growing up in the countryside. I come from a farming family; what the earth gave was what we lived on, and what the earth gave depended on water. My parents only worked at the farm. Droughts, the lack or the

3 Esther Kinsky, *River*, trans. Iain Galbraith (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2018), p. 171.

excess of water, rainstorms, floods, all of them affected our life. I'm organically connected to water. I respect water and know its value.

M.W.D.: Does writing/reading have something to do with the river?

M.L.: I deeply believe so. At the origin of my sporting activism, or as commentators in Poland put it, my literary, poetic activism, were poems as well. I believe that literature, poetry trains us, readers, in states of emergency. It pushes or expands the limits of the imagination and in this way fosters courage in us. Sometimes, as was the case with me, poems provoke ideas as audacious as that of running more than eleven hundred kilometers. A poetry book by the Danish writer Inger Christensen, titled *Alphabet*, was important to me in this context. Had it not been for the poems in this collection, not much would have happened in my life. I know that when writing what I think of as her total poem in the 1980s, Christensen couldn't possibly have known that almost forty years later Bogusława Sochańska would translate it into Polish, a language likely rough and strange-sounding to a Danish writer. I remember reading this book for the first time; it was in 2019, when I met Sochańska, the translator, in Gdynia on the lovely occasion of the Gdynia Literary Prize, and, there, on the steps of a café, in what was still August sunshine, I opened *Alphabet* for the first time only to come around more than three hours later, my arms and face touched by the sun, my throat dry, and my heart pounding in admiration. This book gave me courage to push the limits. And when I read it again (for the umpteenth time!), it occurred to me that the language the poet used was capable of inspiring action, the physical, activist one (I'm not fond of the term, but can't find any better one). When reading, I felt like experiencing first-hand whatever that poetry touched upon, that organicity, that biodiversity, that complex world, followed by reflection on—a grand word—beauty.

On the morning of my last running day, when I'd already got more than one thousand kilometers in my legs, I opened *Alphabet* again in a village poetically named Small Suns, with the body of the river nearby. A key day in achieving the aim of this adventure was ahead of me. Just six to seven more hours to run. Rafał Siderski, my caring support, companion, and above all an outstanding visual artist, who'd been producing a tale in images in parallel to my own in words, was making freshly ground coffee. The day looked to be great, relatively warm, perhaps a bit windy. The fog was rising from the fields and coming out of the Vistula, too. There was joy in me that it was the last day, but paradoxically there was also sadness, for the same reason, and fear as well. Fear? Yes, fear. Fear that, on this "home stretch," my head might refuse to work. The point was, my body was all ready, strung up, focused, but my thoughts were drifting away into darker, depressive regions. And that last running day carried fear with it; fear about every

single step, which might cause an injury; fear that I wouldn't see the spot where the freshwater of the Vistula mixed with the seawater of the Baltic; fear that even though my body was collaborating, my thoughts would labor to stop it. Fear of the kind that seizes the soma, harsh and relentless.

At that key moment, I reached for Christensen's poem. Its measured beat gave me relief and tuned me into the running rhythm: "apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist,"⁴ I murmured. I'm grateful for that poem. I thank literature, which stimulates, opens up one's eyes, calls for participation and action. I thank poetry, which provokes the organic practice of poems through, for example, physical movement, which helps turn vulnerability into energy. I thank poetry, which makes it possible to oppose silence or the dominant mainstream media narratives, gloomy, sad, and depressive ones. I thank poetry, which spreads like circles on the water, which moves the surface of the imagination and that which lies beneath it, like here, in the poem that filled me with courage to look into the current and, through my effort, to give voice to the weaker one:

[...] here I
walk down to the still,
blue of the Sound, shining
with evening, toss
a stone into the water,
see how the circles
widen, reaching
even the farthest shores.⁵

Tales and poems flow like rivers and have their currents; the best ones let you accompany them. It is no different in the writing process; I wait for the moments that I feel the current of the story, of the tale; each of my books started from a source, most frequently an image, and later the main current took confluents in and formed a whole. It's a metaphysical experience. When everything works, you feel fulfilled, as if you were going downstream and arriving at the mouth of the river, running straight into the open waters of the Ocean.

M.W.D.: Where did your idea for *Mer de Glace* come from? Is the glacier a pretext for a geo-narrative/an aqua-narrative? In what way?

4 The verse comes from Susanna Nied's English translation of the poem. The speaker originally quotes the Polish translation by Bogusława Sochańska, which has the Antonovka apple tree (Polish: *antonówka*), a variety very common in Poland, at this point in the text. (translator's note)

5 Inger Christensen, *Alphabet*, trans. Susanna Nied (New York: New Directions, 2001), p. 32. Małgorzata Lebda originally quoted the passage from the Polish edition of the poem; see Inger Christensen, *alfabet*, trans. Bogusława Sochańska (Kraków: Lokator, 2018), p. 33.

M.L.: I felt that the poetic language I had harnessed for years to deal with growing up, initiation, and losses was leaning toward “here and now,” and that, as a poet, I couldn’t be indifferent to the crises in which we lived, including the climate crisis. The Mer de Glace glacier is a place I’ve visited many times over a dozen years or so, and each time I could see how fast we were losing it. A geo-narrative, yes. An aqua-narrative, yes. The Mer de Glace enabled me to talk of powerful things, of global developments, but at the same time I could talk of quotidian life in the shadow of changes. And, yes, that glacier is not only a metaphor for the climate crisis to me, but also a tangible proof of loss. This collection is intended as a mourning threnody, but also as a writing exercise in hope.

M.W.D.: What issues can “water matters” concern, in your view?

M.L.: Everything we are and the world around us. Yes, every single element of the world. “Water matters” would encompass, for example, dolphins, pine trees, dogs, irises, pistachio nuts, the Sargasso Sea, Rożnowskie Lake, the Sahara, our companions here: dog Dunaj and cat Klakier, hurricanes, and apricots. “Water matters” possess an extraordinary poetic potential.

M.W.D.: Which river/water-themed books, films, or paintings were/are important, inspiring or most objectionable to you?

M.L.: I absolutely adore *Dunaj (Danube)* by the Italian writer Claudio Magris. This book shows that intellectual contemplation can be intertwined with the physical, the geographical; that it can engage with how nature arranged rivers, mountain ranges, forest paths. In this context, literature came across as organic to me, as able and willing to be close to life. Magris set out on a journey or, better, on a pilgrimage along the Danube. To me, his gesture was founded on curiosity, on mindfulness vis-à-vis another human being, other cultures, landscapes, traditions, and histories. The writer set off (not running, but in a more sybaritic mode—driving, enjoying regional cuisine and wine, taking things in) in the hopes of expanding the limits of his imagination, hoping to experience, hoping to convert things seen, overheard, and tasted into literature. He was interested in the river in this geographical context, but the river was sealed off in the contexts of literature, mores, and history. I feel that he was also guided by the hope that the line of the river, which is almost three thousand kilometers long and crosses ten European countries (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, where its extensive delta, which is an old bay filled with fluvial sediments, drains into the Black Sea), would help him depict the condition of Europe from the West to the East. Talking about books, Alice Oswald’s poem *Dart* is a must; it’s a splendid, polyvocal, mantra-like tale about accompanying the eponymous River

Dart, which begins in Dartmoor moorlands and runs into the English Channel at Dartmouth. It's a great read; it grew out of hiking along the river, pondering, conversations, imagination, and ideations, and it looks into what language can do with such a theme. There is also Annie Dillard's *Pielgrzym nad Tinker Creek* (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), a book that is respite, inspiration, and a guidepost. Dillard shares her observations and reflections straight from the Appalachians, where she lived for a year and accompanied Tinker Creek. It is a profoundly philosophical and, yes!, poetic thing; here's just a piece, also showing the beauty of language: "I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat—not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone."⁶ And there is also Esther Kinsky, whom you've mentioned, with her *River*, where the trail, the leitmotif is provided by the Lea River, but also other rivers, remembered ones, such as the Rhine, the Oder, the Neretva...I'll cap this aquatic catalogue with Wit Szostak's latest novel titled *Rumowiska* [*Rubbles*], where a profoundly philosophical tale, a treatise on the river, on rivers, is woven into the complicated life-stories of the protagonists.

M.W.D.: Of the recent news about Polish rivers (or, more broadly, the world's rivers), what was it that moved you most?

M.L.: As for Poland, it was certainly a turn to rivers, a greater awareness of what these ecosystems are, the consciousness of how much we depend on rivers. I watch activists' actions and am touched to see the strong attachment some of them develop to the rivers they protect, for example, Daniel Petryczkiewicz, who lovingly takes care of the Mała River, or Siostry Rzeki (Eng.: River Sisters), who are a strong artistic and activist collective. Knowing they are there, I'm less worried about our rivers. As for reports from the world, the news of March 2023 that Mirela Kumbaro, the Albanian Minister of the Environment, founded the Vjosa Rier National Park, which covers the entire watercourse of the Vjosa River in Albania (together with its tributaries, the rivers Drino, Bënçe and Shushicë). And before that, the news from 2017 that the parliament of New Zealand granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River. And there is also the Magpie River in Canada, to which the local authorities granted the personhood status in March 2021. I'm looking forward to such decisions in Poland.

M.W.D.: Could you list some water-related artistic projects you regard as the most interesting ones and perhaps translating into changed attitudes to water ecosystems?

6 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 203.

M.L.: Regarding visual arts, I'd think of photographic projects. One of them is Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. It is a photographic essay on people who live by the river, on their weaknesses, ugliness, aspirations, dreams, and expectations. The outskirts stretching along the river show a different facet of the U.S. Another project is *Yangtze: The Long River* by Nadav Kander, where we can follow a visual tale of the Yangtze River, which comes across as a post-apocalyptic monster in Kander's photographs. Contrasted with its power and force are people, who look like wax figurines, mere extras. It is a story of difficult relations between development and nature. For its part, Rafał Siderski's *Paradise to Lose* is an intimate tale about the creek of my childhood I've already talked about. The photographer watches it, visits it, and records it at various times of the day and in various seasons of the year. He bonds with this being in order to use this micro-story to tell of the beauty we can lose by destroying rivers. To finish with, there is also Carolyn Drake and her *Two Rivers*, a story of the 2,500-kilometer-long watercourse of the rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya, which traverses five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. It is a poignant image of the climate crisis and human short-sightedness and greed. On the one hand, it's a picture of disaster, already underway and aggravating, and on the other, it's a picture of beauty, which still glimmers somewhere in the current.

M.W.D.: What way(s) of talking of rivers and "water matters" can be offered in school/university education? Could you share examples of practices in working with students? What can education take from the river for itself?

M.L.: I subscribe to the ideas of the poet and botanist Urszula Zajączkowska, who believes that in-depth education through experiencing holds a great potential, which we haven't tapped into properly yet. So I envisage outdoor lessons, nature walks conducted by activists, natural scientists, and, finally, poets. I envisage reading poems by rivers, about rivers, for the river. I envisage inspiring youngsters to write about rivers, to develop interest in small watercourses, sometimes unnamed, close to where they live; let them give them names, look after them, be their ambassadors. Instead of cramming the data on the length of rivers and their tributaries, let students go on an outing to a river nearby, touch its surface, dip their feet into it, become familiar with this organic quality to feel responsible for it. We aren't going to cherish what we aren't acquainted with. Let us become acquainted with rivers, creeks, and streams.

M.W.D.: Thank you for talking with me.

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