

# Thinking Like a Mountain

## Supplement

**Se t'avviene di trattar delle acque  
(Should you deal with water)**

Susanna Ravelli

*Se t'avviene di trattar delle acque  
consulta prima l'esperienza e poi la ragione*

*"Should you deal with water,  
first consult experience and then reason."*

This is how Leonardo da Vinci described his approach to studying the waters of rivers and seas. His sketches and notes, seemingly disordered, outline traces for open and ever-inspiring reflections on vortices, wave motion, and the nature of flow.

It is an act of knowledge activated through the direct experience of a foundational action: immersion.

Immersing oneself in the waters of a river immediately places us in contact with the elusive and fluid dimension of its nature, where our position remains suspended in an unstable and adaptive floating line, encountering the potential of that threshold that Deleuze calls "states of existence."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968.

# Thinking Like a Mountain

We belong to the air with our feet firmly planted on the ground, and we belong to water in the measure that our ocean remains our breathing. We experience the river on an in-between line, a floating line, in a balance that sees us ever vulnerable and in a space of adaptability, significantly reshaping our predatory attitude, questioning the perception of identity and opening up reflection on our marginality in complex, interconnected ecosystems.

Midway between sky and earth, our listening to the river amplifies as it flows, collecting and redistributing sounds, memories, and voices: a single soundscape that inhabits various states of relationship with both the submerged and emerged environment, where the white noise of the water is overlaid by the roar of hulls and all the sounds that fish, amphibians, and birds use to communicate. Along this floating line, where the states of the aqueous, the fluid, and the aerial matter mix and reshape, the biocentric relationship of collaborative, interspecies adaptation is reaffirmed.

The river flows and disperses, irrigating miles of its banks. Water penetrates deeply and expands, bringing life and death to all the territories it touches. For years, we have considered the waters of rivers to be the cleaners of discharge and waste, removing the residues of human activity on the environment, and the development of dense urban areas. The act of flowing was associated with “taking away,” washing, cleansing, and draining pollutants away from the source and towards the sea, ignoring the fact that river corridors are cyclical, complex ecosystems, firmly interrelated with our own well-being. The waters of rivers gather upstream and return downstream, becoming sea, clouds and rain, nourishing fields, forests, animals, and entering the food chain of which we are a part. The depletion of waters is closely related to a

# Thinking Like a Mountain

progressive scarcity in the quality of a primary asset that all living beings on our planet need unconditionally.

Pollutants, just like the nutrients that the river transports, quickly enter the life cycle, not only of the riparian areas but of the complexity of ecological relationships that the river binds. Consider the growing problem of micro- and nano-plastics: they have become pervasive components. Found in biochemical analyses conducted by regional environmental protection agencies on periodic sampling, they pollute rivers and canals that serve cities and rural areas. The water in reservoirs denotes the memory of the Anthropocene, drawing on the presence of progressive hybridization between the natural and the artificial. It is precisely through the water we drink and absorb as living beings that we metabolize—more or less traumatically for our bodies—synthetic biological cryptforms, establishing a new continuity between living and non-living matter.

From source to mouth, tirelessly, never the same, the river constantly changes and modifies the surrounding environment; it transports sand and debris from one place and deposits it elsewhere, creating beaches, bends, sandbars, and new channels. The river is always a collection of organized and different materials in motion.

It is a body of water, just like our own body: “We are all bodies of water,” says Astrida Neimanis. The experience of immersion is a relationship of welcome, of deep encounter and resonance of the same matter, a process of knowledge that passes through the senses before reason, connecting our present and ancestral

# Thinking Like a Mountain

natures. “Water is between bodies, but not of bodies, before us, beyond us, yet now also this body here.”<sup>2</sup>

The hydro-feminist perspective suggested by Astrida Neimanis, linked to the attention of watery incarnation, offers a profound ecological reading in which water connects all bodies through *selectively permeable membranes*. In recognizing this watery-bodily connection, Neimanis highlights the fluidity of distinctions between humans and non-humans. In this sense, the vital interdependence between watery collectives is affirmed, along with the capacity to influence one another positively or negatively in a reciprocal manner.

From an ecological and systemic perspective, the river gathers what it encounters along its path. The water body is a sensitive indicator of anthropic pressure and climate change. The decline in water quality, caused by anthropic pollutants and the lack of consideration for the consequences of human action on nature, is directly linked to the quality of our lives and the shared responsibility for the preservation of a vital resource, the lack of which can be lethal.

The emblematic case of Ghana, which had to impose water rationing due to the alarming pollution of its rivers—60% of the country’s waterways—due to illegal goldmining operations known as “galamsey” (which occupies 40% of the population), is striking. Ghana is one of Africa’s leading gold producers but its population pays the highest price: that of its water supply. The pollution of rivers has severely reduced agricultural areas and exacerbated food security problems. The reversal of the concept of *precious*

---

<sup>2</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2017.

# Thinking Like a Mountain

*goods* and the value attributed to gold and water in a dystopian relationship is shocking.

The Yamuna River, one of the most polluted rivers in the world, has become a symbol of a radical ecological conquest: long violated and ignored, it was one of the first rivers to receive legal recognition as a legal person in 2017, thus acquiring the right to exist as an agent.

The recognition of primary and secondary rivers as legal persons is still a topic seldom addressed by environmentalists and environmental lawyers, especially in Italy.

It means recognizing the river as an active subject, with rights and duties, a position drawn from the vital function it serves for life and the environment. Therefore, no longer the *terra nullius* it was once considered, nor just an organism of ecosystem services, but, as Roberto Louvin asserts, “the recognition of these natural elements as *res communes omnium*, that is, goods to be placed *extra commercium*, just like *res sacrae*.”<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that the first rivers to gain legal recognition as persons belong to cultures and communities that recognize the sacredness of the river body.

Water, echoing Astrida Neimanis’s thought, questions the categories on which the domains of social, political, philosophical, and environmental thought are based.

---

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Louvin “The legal personality of natural water bodies,” in *Diritto pubblico e comparato europeo*, quarterly magazine 3/2017 pp. 623–648.

# Thinking Like a Mountain

The river, the extended body of water, becomes a body of conflict. It is the place where the interests and vital roots of different species—both human and non-human—coalesce. The action of human collectives significantly affects the self-regenerative capacity of rivers and water bodies. The conflict is inherent in a contested element like water, primarily arising from human predatory action and the often irreconcilable interests between agricultural, industrial, civil, and ecological uses. The ongoing climate transition and the exponential reduction in water reserves fuel the need for a radically different vision from the current capitalist one. The hydraulic regime of rivers is increasingly subject to extreme cycles of drought and concentrated rainfall, challenging models of perpetual water availability, even in the Po Valley, which collects contributions from a highly pervasive hydrographic system. Pollution from floating waste and microplastics underscores the legacy of the view of rivers as *terra nullius*.

We are bodies of water and part of all the bodies of water we recognize. We can be rivers in a dimension of habitation, of *home understood as a space of commonality*, of connective relationships common to all living and non-living beings. In this eco-centric dimension, a consciousness of circularity and interaction of both positive and negative factors influencing care emerges as a singular and collective responsibility of bodies that resonate because they are aqueous bodies immersed in various states of water and earth.

The free-flowing river is still a wild environment in which, despite human control, nature governs and determines characteristics and cycles, generating unexpected configurations. The sedimentary process of the river creates a constant modification

# Thinking Like a Mountain

of the water body, which does not lose its geographical recognizability but renegotiates its shape in relation to the environments and ecosystems it connects. The river is meadow, forest, pasture, and beach; its bed is the edge of grassy and forested banks, rocks, clay banks, and uncultivated lands.

The river is a complex system of ecological corridors, an extensive hydrographic body, a transitional body of water states, and a geological archive of memory capable of communicating with all living beings on the planet. Crossing the river and letting oneself be inhabited by water in that floating line is an exercise in vision, the exploration of a memory, a decentralized thought, and parallel geographies. It can be a rebellious act that rekindles a dialogue interrupted by the aqueous and fluid nature of our own being and the landscape stretching up to the highest mountain peaks, where water remains a perennial reserve.

# Thinking Like a Mountain

## Biographical Notes

Susanna Ravelli, independent researcher, lives and works between Cremona and Milan. For over 20 years she has been working on art and cultural projects linked to participatory strategies and processes for development programs in riparian and coastal areas. He collaborates on training plans with public and private institutions, with a focus on Creative Cultural Enterprises in contemporary visual and performing arts. He has coordinated several projects financed with Italian Council and Creative Europe funds.

Co-manages in Cremona with Dino Ferruzzi the space It's hard noise: creative transits for a common home, dedicated to active workshops in contemporary art and music.

From 2019 in the ATS of Casa degli Artisti, Milan. Since 2021 co-founder of Volcanic Attitude Festival, at the 3rd edition. In 2023 co-curator of the CERCA reader program, selected for Italy at the IV BienalSur.

With Olga Gambari, O+S, she developed a residency program focused on the concept of Koinotes, the Germinative Community dedicated to collectives.

She is the author and curator, together with Michela Eremita, of *Grand Tour en Italie*, an itinerant artistic residency program, realized in Palermo (2018), invited to the collateral events of Manifesta12, to Nottilucente 2019 in San Gimignano (FI) and to Naples from 2022. Together with Annalisa Cattani and Maura Banfo, she is coauthor of MANUS tabloid, a publishing project conceived as an artistic practice and performance, which explores the relationship between autonarration and investigation of intimate feeling.

She has spoken in working groups on the commons and interactions with intangibles, the construction of new forms of cultural heritage, art, and creative professions.