

# ONE HAUNTED RIVER

## Histories and Spectres of the Odra

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**ABSTRACT:** In July and August of 2022, the Odra/Oder River, much of which flows through Silesia in southwest Poland, experienced a massive environmental disaster. Within the context of this devastating event, this text explores the Odra River and Silesia as “haunted landscapes” (Tsing et al., 2017). Considering the ghostly traces that tell the river’s regional histories, a “hauntological approach,” posits that landscapes are processes of layering and sedimentation, of ever unfolding meanings (Derrida, 1994; Roberts, 2013). This inquiry examines the catastrophe and reactions in Poland and Germany, situating the incident in the river’s longer material-socio-cultural history, including narratives about the region. Particular attention is given to Osoba Odra, an initiative formed as a reaction to the 2022 environmental disaster and massive fish die-off that the river experienced through industrial contamination and climate change and exacerbated by a lack of response from the Polish government. Positing the question “Is a river a person?” the Osoba Odra initiative is part of an expanding movement among legal scholars, Indigenous communities, and environmental NGOs that rivers be recognised as legal persons, granting them increased rights to protection (O’Donnell, 2018).

**KEYWORDS:** narratives; ontologies; rivers; nature’s rights; legal personhood

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The Odra/Oder<sup>1</sup> River rises in the Olomouc district of Czechia, where it meanders north and then, more gradually, westward. The river flows through Silesia in southwest Poland, a region long associated with industrialisation. The Odra’s waters approach the German state of Brandenburg, where they continue to the Szczecin/Stettin Lagoon and eventually flow into the shallow waters of the Baltic Sea. Like many rivers in Europe and across the world, the Odra is burdened by the troubles of modernity: hubris, inattention, disregard, and the persistent drive toward short-term profit at the expense of all else. Most notably in recent years, the Odra was the site of a widescale ecological disaster that led to a massive die-off of fish and molluscs in August of 2022. Within the context of this devastating event, this essay explores the Odra River and Silesia as “haunted landscapes” (Tsing et al., 2017). Considering the ghostly traces that tell the river’s regional histories, a hauntological approach, posits that landscapes are processes of layering and sedimentation, of ever unfolding meanings

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<sup>1</sup> It is more common for the river to be referred in English by its German name the Oder. However, Slavic names are becoming increasingly used in English. As the choice of what to call things is inherently political and can be perceived as revisionist, I generally refer to places by the current names in the country where they are now located. As most of the Odra flows through Poland and the focus of my text is more on Poland than Germany, I use the name Odra throughout the essay.

(Derrida, 1994; Roberts, 2013). Hauntology is inherently linked to ontology, in fact in French the two words sound the same. These perspectives challenge a dominant narrative lens at work for over the last two centuries that generates entrenched ways of seeing the world according to sharp distinctions drawn between nature and culture, the rational and irrational, and things often perceived to be real and not real. This distorting lens is pervasive and informs multiple working assumptions, continuously throwing up obstacles and blind spots, including for those working to promote and translate more wholistic approaches.<sup>2</sup>

As a key voice advancing more-than-human perspectives, literary Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk describes the Odra River as a living entity both entangled with and mirroring the structures of other organisms. Her comments to this effect, and those cited below, are from an interview posted on the Osoba Odra website. As shown in Figure 1, positing the question “Is a river a person?” this initiative is part of an expanding movement among legal scholars, indigenous communities, and environmental NGOs that rivers be recognised as legal persons, granting them increased rights to protection (O’Donnell 2018). The campaign is organised by a core group of activists engaged personally and professionally with river landscapes, who assert, “we are the tribe of the Odra” (*Jesteśmy Plemieniem Odry*).<sup>3</sup> As a reaction to the 2022 environmental disaster and subsequent lack of response by the Polish officials, the Osoba Odra initiative, which has delivered multiple petitions to the Polish government, composed a detailed legal proposal recognising the river’s personhood. It also organises events and raises funds for the project.

Tokarczuk refers to the Odra as a “caesura in space,” stressing the river’s unique cultural and political significance in Europe. She asserts that it “participated in political treaties,” becoming an entity that, “constituted a border.” Here, the term indicates a dramatic shift or rupture marking a change between two eras. In this case, the break also reconstitutes space according to a new political order, marking the beginning of the Cold War. Tokarczuk’s comments refer to the Allied powers’ decision, at the close of World War II, to cede significant parts of Germany’s eastern regions to Poland, as compensation for Polish lands in the east that were annexed by the Soviet Union during the war, which would not be returned. In doing so, the allies determined that the Oder-Neisse Line would form the new boundary between Poland and Germany. The Potsdam conference, held in July and August of 1945, clarified the new borders of Poland and stipulated that German populations living in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland would be transferred to Germany. From 1945 to 1950, 12-14 million Germans either fled or were forcibly relocated. Approximately, three million of

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<sup>2</sup> Texts by Vickie Kirby (2017) and Ashley Barnwell (2017) are especially productive in articulating the difficulties of challenging distinctions between nature and culture, as well as assumptions of human exceptionalism. Moreover, I find the title of this collection of articles – i.e., *What if culture was nature all along?* – a useful reminder to push against these assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Prominent members of the Odra group include its founder, journalist, author, and shaman, Robert Rient, and Osoba Odra president, communications specialist and branding strategist, Marta Mazgaj, among others. In their online biographies, these central members describe their views about nature that express ideas from deep ecology (a need to recognise and embrace our connections to nature through immersive experience) and reiterate the claims of other rights of nature campaigns (“If the river is poisoned, then we are poisoned, too.”) These perspectives draw from alternative forms of religion and philosophy such as neo-paganism, Buddhism, and mindfulness that are often lumped together with labels such as ‘New Age’ spirituality. Among many conservative Poles, emphasising and embracing such orientations over more conventional, Christian – or more precisely Polish Catholic – perspectives is met with suspicion. The result is that many environmental activists in Poland are portrayed as ‘anti-Polish,’ and under the influence of foreign (especially German) interests (Wilson 2023).

those displaced, the largest single group, were from Silesia (Deutsche Vertriebene, MDR 2023; Douglas 2012; Eberhardt 2006). Additionally, “caesura,” can indicate a poetic device, an interruption or break within a verse – a forceful disruption. In this case, the term serves as both a metaphor *and* something more tangible, expressing the many human interventions that compromise the Odra, in recent years culminating in the devastation of 2022.

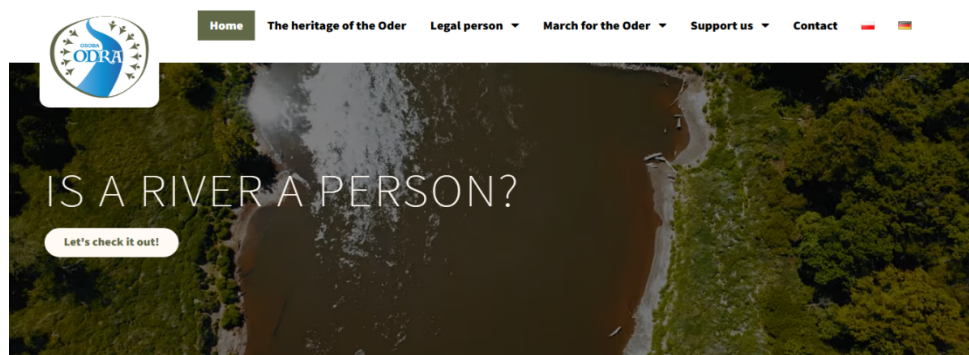


Figure 1 – Osoba Odra campaign website advocating that the river be recognised as a legal person.

This text approaches the Odra from three angles, each of which reveals hauntological aspects. The first section aims to situate the ecological disaster and its aftermath within the river’s longer material-socio-cultural history by examining stories of belonging, displacement, and trauma. Following, Tsing et al. (2017), this inquiry examines the Odra as a “haunted landscape,” in which “ghosts are the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade” (2017, G1). The second segment focuses on the haunting losses of environmental disaster, especially the unfolding of events in July and August of 2022 and the aftermath. The third explores the processes through which human and more-than-human displacements and traumas emerge and intersect, giving rise to activism and to new visions for the future that include a struggle for the recognition of the Odra’s legal personhood.

## Modernity, war and displacement

The Odra’s emerging materialities and ontologies are inherently bound up with the displacements, traumas, and ambivalence that extend from the violence of World War II and its aftermath, the river’s status as a post-war border, and as a continuing participant in new world orders. In post-World War II Poland, officials referred to regions ceded from Germany to Poland as “the recovered lands” (*Ziemie Odzyskane*) – a label meant to lend legitimacy to Poland’s claim to these regions by invoking the period from 1000-1400 when Silesia was often an integral part of Poland and semi-independent Slavic duchies in Pomerania were at times controlled by Polish rule, prior to more extensive Germanisation of these regions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In different periods, the term ‘Silesia’ referred to somewhat different areas. Today most of it is located in Poland, where it is also divided into Upper and Lower Silesia, with the former laying more southeasterly and closer to the mountain ranges in southern Poland. There is a small Silesian region in the Olomouc region of Czechia. The remainder of historical Silesia has become part of the German states of Brandenburg and Saxony

Some observers suggest “exploited lands” (*ziemie wyzyskane*) as a more accurate moniker, pointing to authorities’ drive to extract as much profit from the region as quickly as possible with little consideration for long-term consequences. More recently, author Zbigniew Rokita has proposed the term “Odrzania”, in his book by the same title (2023); a direct reference to the Odra and the adjacent lands on the Polish side of the border. However, he also extends the term to regions well beyond the Odra region. Rokita explains:

*I refer to the post-German lands annexed to Poland after the war less often as the Recovered Territories, and more often as Odrzanska Polska or Odrzania - even if cities such as Olsztyn or Gdansk are not at all on the Oder River (2023).<sup>5</sup>*

In his book written, in part, as a travelogue, Rokita journeys through towns and cities, interviewing inhabitants of these former German regions. With history as a central reference point, his conversations with interlocutors explore political and social moods, investigating the layers between what is German and what is Polish. Rokita questions where the boundaries are clear and where identities and attachments intersect and merge.

Today the lands ceded to Poland comprise approximately a third of the territory of the Polish state. Similar to other texts that address these regions, *Odrzania* describes the extensive post-war extraction of resources from these regions, for example, bricks and other building materials that were removed from the annexed regions and carried east to rebuild Warsaw – a city razed by the German army at the end of World War II. Rokita suggests that Polish authorities treated these lands as a colony from which the most profit should be squeezed, perhaps partly because many people were uncertain about whether they would really remain part of Poland. In the first two decades after the war, there were many people who viewed settling in the annexed territory as risky. Over time, however, he argues that inhabitants became more attached to these ‘new’ places and resented the dismissive attitude of central authorities and others from central Poland as well as the more limited resources that were allocated to the post-German regions, landscapes and inhabitants that remain haunted by their past. Reflecting on the United States and Mexico, Tsing et al. assert that, “[g]hosts accumulate on both sides of the border from the residues of violence” (2017, G4). A similar point can be made regarding the material extraction, displacements, and destruction in present-day Poland and Germany.

Elisabeth Roberts’ “hauntological approach” to visual geography posits that landscapes are processes of layering and sedimentation, with ever unfolding meanings (2013). This perspective employs Derrida’s (1994) concept of hauntology, a critique of conventional scholarship for its compulsion to “ontologize and rationalize,” and its refusal to engage with matters that exceed the realms of ‘objective scientificity’ (Kaplan, 2008). Derrida asserts that scholars are not able “to speak with spectres or let them speak because they draw sharp distinctions between the real and unreal, the living and the non- living, the being and non-being.” Hauntings challenge this either/or logic (Roberts, 2013).

Hauntings can be both direct and indirect. Those less direct, “secondary hauntings,” rely on “textual residues” of history, including tropes produced and reproduced through “collective intrapsychic states” such as trauma and grief (Lincoln & Lincoln, 2015). In particular,

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<sup>5</sup> Rokita’s use of the term Odrzania has been well received by many Poles. However, it is worth mentioning that some people object to its use as an artificial construction, which should not be applied to region well beyond the Odra - see for example, the review *Czytam i piszę*. In response, Rokita has stated that his primary focus was not geographical (interview 2023).

narratives of loss linger in families, communities, as well as regional and national histories. Or, at the other extreme, traumas from physical displacement and other material assaults leave scars that are rarely discussed. In fact, Silesia and Poland's "recovered territories" invoke multiple displacements. Many Poles who fled or were forced to leave eastern regions at the end of the Second World War relocated to these newly acquired regions in the west. Soviet political influence in post-war Poland meant that there was no official recognition of such displacements and the loss of these formerly Polish places in the eastern borderlands (*kresy* in Polish). However, writer Andrzej Zawada asserts that in Lower Silesia in the area around Wrocław (formerly the German city of Breslau), awareness of this connection persisted through family stories (cited in Rokita, pp. 34-35). Additionally, the post-war southeast of Poland was ethnically cleansed of Ukrainians, who were forced to relocate to the northwest coast of the new Polish state, another former German region.

As a specialist on east-central Europe, living in east Germany for over a decade, I have often encountered people who mention that their families came from Silesia and acknowledge the entangled and troubled histories of the two countries. Sometimes, traces of this past reside under the surface. For instance, a student described to me the unexpected experience he had when interviewing his grandfather, whom he was quite close to, for a class project. In the process, he learned about the trauma that his grandfather experienced as a child when his family was forced to leave Silesia, which he previously knew nothing about. Moreover, Silesians themselves also posed a problem for the German and Polish states, as many self-identify as ethnically distinct, with their own language or dialect (depending on one's perspective). The matter of who was German and who was Silesian after the war was also far from clear. Within Poland, Silesians have often been seen as too German or at least as not really Polish.

The massive transfer of populations at the end of World War II marked an especially abrupt rupture or caesura in life worlds. However, there have also been displacements that were more incremental, cases in which populations and their ways of life were not always forced out, but at times were also incorporated within. For instance, one can still observe traces of Slavic subsistence communities who previously inhabited regional flood plain forests in the German states of Saxony and Brandenburg. These residues are most notably abundant in the form of place names, especially the many towns, villages, and neighbourhoods ending with "-itz," including my own neighbourhood of Reudnitz in Leipzig. Its name comes from a local brook (Östliche Rietzscheke), which today flows mainly through underground canals.

Taking a longer view reveals that processes often labelled as "political" or "cultural," have been especially entangled with Silesia's mineral deposits of lead, zinc, silver and gold, as well as coal. Guided by German industrialists and the Prussian state, the arrival of new mining technologies in the 19th century, in particular, has left lasting marks on the region, which are especially relevant to the Odra's present-day environmental woes. Deborah Rose Bird effectively articulates the ruthless commitment to modernist futures that white settler colonialism wrought on Indigenous communities and landscapes in Australia (Tsing et al. G7). Similar, destructive impulses were also underway within Europe, poisoning landscapes, as well as human and other-than-human inhabitants, with the poorest and most vulnerable humans bearing the brunt of modernisation's burdens.

## Calamity, Summer 2022

The ecological disaster of the Odra River in July and August of 2022 (Figure 2) is an event that natural scientists believe may take the river decades to recover from. The tragedy emerged through the convergence of at least two anthropogenic factors: the release of industrial contamination that increased the salinity of the river's water and warmer temperatures that together produced ideal conditions for the flourishing of golden algae (*Prymnesium parvum*), a species normally found in brackish waters. A European Union report on the Odra incident (2023) identifies further contributing elements including persistent drought that resulted in low water levels diminishing dilution and water flow, as well as elevated nutrient concentrations, especially phosphorus and nitrogen, that promote such blooms. The algal bloom created an environment in which fish, mussels, and snails were starved of oxygen and died (Marchowski et al. 2023) (Figure 3). The sight and smell of the enormous fish kill were especially troubling to human inhabitants and others connected with the river (some estimates suggest there were 360 tons of dead fish in the river). However, regarding the river's recovery, the killing of bivalves was even more damaging, as these filter feeders carry out the important task of cleaning the water and removing contaminants.

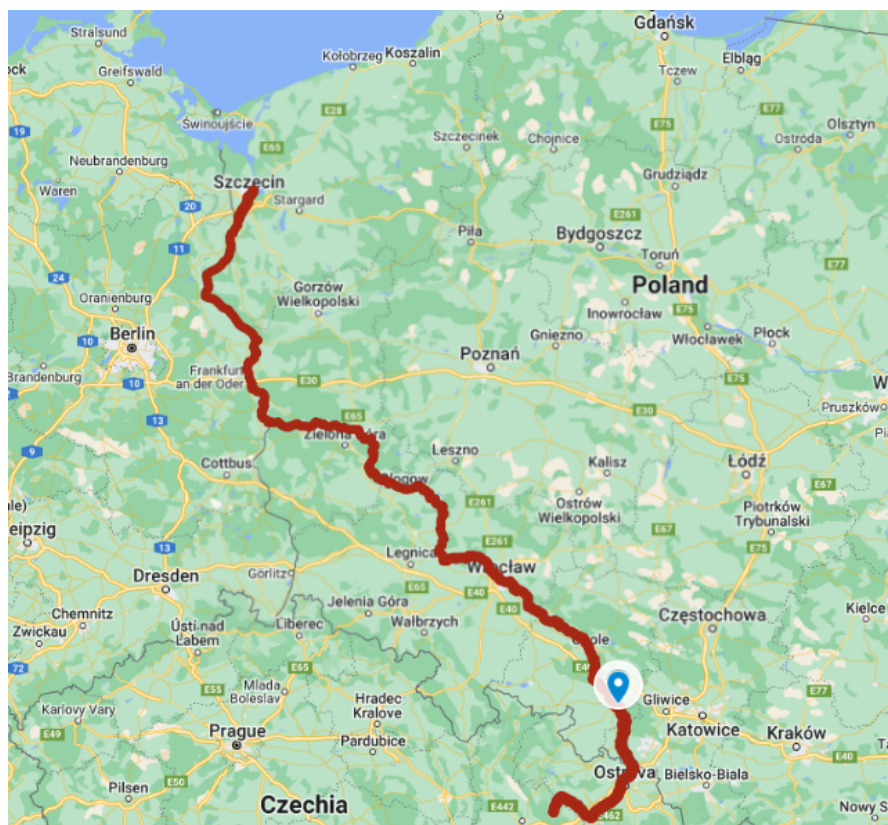


Figure 2 - Pathway of the Odra/Oder River and the site of initial contamination in Upper Silesia, July-August 2022. (Kasper Wojsław-Wilson.)





Figure 3 - Fish die-off on the Odra (*Fischsterben, Oder*) 13 August 2022  
(Hanno Böck, CCo, via Wikimedia Commons).

The disaster was compounded by gross incompetence on the part of both regional agencies responsible for monitoring the river, as well as the then governing Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, hereafter PiS) in Poland. Recreational fishers were among the first to sound the alarm after encountering large numbers of dead fish in the river. In some cases, in which concerned citizens notified government agencies and stressed the extent of the problem, officials promised to act, but then did nothing. Polish agencies failed to notify German authorities of the contamination. German state institutions also demonstrated ineffective management of the disaster when federal and state agencies bickered over who was responsible, failing to address the matter in a timely way. For example, in his frustration over a lack of action, the mayor Frankfurt am Oder made the decision to undertake clean-up of dead fish at the local level (Gabsch, 2022).

In Poland, PiS party representatives have long cultivated an instrumental account that draws on national fears by connecting with a broader, pre-existing narrative that asserts a historic and on-going German aim to undermine the Polish nation. This overarching narrative foregrounds Polish national identity and situates “Polish values,” associated with the Roman Catholic Church and patriarchal concepts of family, in opposition to an “immoral,” more secular, western society that has lost its way. Unfortunately, this condemnation does not generally include a critique of the rapacious industrialisation that Deborah Rose Bird describes but focuses on a lack of narrowly defined Christian religiosity. Moreover, since the 1990s many politicians, religious leaders, and media in Poland have depicted environmental organisations as “eco-fascists,” working on behalf of alien (often German) interests (Wilson, 2005).

The PiS government’s decidedly antagonistic stance toward Germany certainly exacerbated the situation and likely played a key part in its failure to notify German officials, hindering efforts to respond to the contamination. Some PiS politicians even suggested that Berlin was to blame for the contamination, asserting it was an effort to undermine the Polish government (Pawłowicz cited in Gabsch, 2022). This disaster and the reaction of PiS officials reveal sites where the ghosts of history, displacements, and trauma (and their deliberate instrumentalisation) converge with the human and more-than-human hauntings of devastated aquatic landscapes. The Polish minister of the environment at the time, Anna

Moskwa, was widely condemned for her ineffective response. One newspaper headline read (in translation), “The Odra is not contaminated? That’s what Environmental Minister Anna Moskwa claims” (Skiba, 2022). Representatives of the Green party, leaders Urszula Zielinska and Małgorzata Tracz (Wrocław), called for the resignation of Moskwa and several regional governors for a grotesque abdication of their responsibilities. Tracz stressed that:

*No action was taken to save the Odra River. No trained services or military were sent. Their tasks were carried out by anglers... For two weeks our state did not even send protective equipment to the anglers who removed these fish (cited in Wysocki, 2022).*

Wiesław Heliniak, vice president of the Polish Angling Association confirmed that mainly fishers and community members were involved in cleaning the Oder River, adding that the scale of the disaster would have been even worse if they had not done so. At the time he stated, “we cry and we vomit, but we keep collecting the carcasses” (Kuźnik, 2022). Concrete measures undertaken under PiS governance were largely limited to introducing a new river monitoring program and approval for a new sewage treatment project. Environmental organisations in Poland and Germany accused the Polish government of ignoring the main culprits, industrial polluters, including the influential Polish mining industry (Collins, 2023).

In the aftermath of the disaster, German scientists at the Leibniz Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries have stressed that salinity levels remain too high in the Oder and have called for an urgent need to alter procedures for discharge permits from those based on *loads* (amount of discharges) to those based on *concentrations* that reflect on-going measurement of the intensity of substances. Other recommendations include allowing the river to remain or return to a more natural state, which results in more land saturation and therefore increased dilution of concentrations (Wolf, cited in Neumann, 2022). Scholars and activists continue to stress the violent and invasive character of large-scale engineering projects that drastically alter the course of rivers and a need for more natural rivers, including restoration of access between rivers and their flood plains (Bednarek and Mołoniewicz, 2023). On its website, the Osoba Odra initiative effectively highlights the extensive damage that humans have inflicted on the river, as well as the self-defeating nature and futility of these endeavours:

*The Odra River is formed by what has shaped it. It combines with its tributaries, grows, and feels the full power of the river basin, often likened to the circulatory system. Memories of being free, of old riverbeds, of wet meadows, swamps, peat bogs, and floodplain forests. But also a reminder of the hydro-technical shackles of old locks, weirs, dams, sluices, and drainage ditches. Once the Odra River flowed for over 1000 km, but it was shortened, straightened, civilized, and brutally disciplined. Almost its entire length of 855 km has been heavily transformed, and this changed river will never be able to accompany or serve us well enough because it breaks free to act according to its free and healthy nature. (Osoba Odra website, 2022)*

Aggressive disruptions into the natural rhythms of rivers manifest as multiple caesuras, marking the destruction of biotopes, habitats, even the extinction of species. These losses – another form of haunting absence – curtail and undermine the life-giving and restorative potentialities of these sites for human and non-human co-inhabitants.



### *Osoba Odra*: Renewed activism – The Rights of Nature reach Europe

The 2022 Odra disaster sparked widespread protest within Poland, most notably the *Osoba Odra* campaign that advocates granting legal personhood to ensure better protection. The initiative's founder, journalist, activist and shaman, Robert Rient and other supporters have organised an on-going project that includes a website in Polish, German, and English, a petition to collect online signatures, and multiple videos, one of which features dozens of citizens making an appeal to the Polish government to acknowledge the personhood of the Odra. Engaged activists and volunteers connected with *Osoba Odra* and *Siostry Rzeki* (River Sisters), as well as other river initiatives and broader environmental groups are among the proponents of the campaign advocating for legal personhood of the river. This movement is inspired by successful campaigns to grant other bodies of water legal personhood, most notably the Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Mar Menor lagoon in Spain, notable as the first case of a natural body being recognised as possessing legal rights in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

In the Mar Menor case, the Law 19/2022 recognises the lagoon's own right "to exist as an ecosystem and to evolve naturally" as well as its right to protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration. As a means to grant this natural entity a voice, the legal provision establishes a 'guardianship' for the Mar Menor, to be composed of three new bodies: a Committee of Representatives, a Monitoring Commission and a Scientific Committee (Fuchs 2023). In his interviews with local residents, business people, activists, anglers, natural scientists, and legal scholars, Robert Rient (*Osoba Odra*) asks his interlocutors to express in words what they believe the Odra would like to tell us after the 2022 disaster. Their responses include the following:

*"I, the Odra am telling you that I am furious about what you have done to me!  
You had absolutely no right to do that! "*

*"Let me flow in peace!*

*"Don't be fools. Because I will manage on my own. But what will happen to you,  
boys and girls?"*

*"Dear children, for centuries I have done so much for you! I have done so much  
good for you. ... Now it's time for you to do something for me. Strive for my legal  
personhood!" (Rient, 2022)*

In *Osoba Odra*'s appeal to the Polish government, among those making contributing statements is Laboritorem Pieśni (Song Laboratory), a vocal and percussion group of women whose songs are inspired by range of regional European music traditions (especially from Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, but also the Balkans, Scandinavia, and Georgia).<sup>7</sup> In their appeal they explain the significance of the successful campaign for recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person in New Zealand. In this case, Indigenous groups and environmental activists asserted that "I am the river and the river is me. If the river is dying, then so am I" (Hikuroa, Salmond, Lythberg, and Brierley, 2024). Laboritorem Pieśni translated the first phrase into Polish, rendering their appeal to the Polish government in song form (*Jestem rzeką i rzeka jest mną*). This chorus, which has a droning, haunting quality

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<sup>6</sup> Other examples of states recognizing the rights of rivers include Columbia (Hansche and Meisch, 2021), Bangladesh and India (Nayak et al., 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Laboritorem Pieśni was formed in Gdansk in 2013. Its members include Alina Jurczyszyn, Kamila Bigus, Lila Bosowska, Iwona Bajger, Magda Jurczyszyn-Turło, Alina Klebba, and Karolina Stawiszyńska.

is also featured in a half-hour long film *Osoba Odra - film o rzece, która chce być osobą* (2022). The short activist documentary features Rient's interviews with men and women from a range of backgrounds expressing the importance of the river in their lives and explaining why it should be recognised as a person. These conversations reveal people whose well-being and livelihoods depend on the river, such as anglers who describe the meditative state that accompanies time spent on the river and small business owners whose work is closely bound to the river.

Rient's interviews with legal experts reveal their views on how one could advance these (personhood) perspectives. For example, lawyer Karolina Kuszlewicz argues that the shock and injustice of the poisoning of the Odra could provide a window of opportunity to make a significant change to Polish law. Additionally, law professor Jerzy Bieluk suggests that class action lawsuits could provide an avenue of advancing legal personhood for rivers and other natural entities. Rient also interviewed hydrologist Piotr Bednarek, president of Free Rivers (Wolne Rzeki), an association of naturalists advocating that rivers be allowed to follow their natural course. Bednarek describes the overall poor state of Polish rivers due to misguided and disastrous human interventions over the last century. Other activist initiatives include a highly publicised funeral march in Warsaw to mourn the death of the Odra organised by the River Sisters, who describe themselves as an ecofeminist (or *hydrofeminist*) art collective (Figure 4). They also contribute to the *Osoba Odra* campaign.



Figure 4 - Funeral March for the Odra.Warsaw, 17 August 2022. (Cecylia Malik.)

Founded in 2017 by Cracovian artist/activist Cecylia Malik, the group focuses on speaking on behalf of rivers, giving them a voice by raising awareness through organised events and initiatives and through the work of each of its six core members. They are especially committed to protecting the remaining 'wild' rivers in Europe, raising awareness about the damage that regulating rivers causes, hindering the building of new, large-scale infrastructure and returning Poland's rivers to a natural state. The group's website posts a webinar by an ichthyologist who discusses the disastrous impacts of hydroelectric plants, asserting that they raise water temperatures and kill hundreds of millions of fish (Mikołajczyk, 2020). Another segment on the River Sisters website decares (in translation) that "only beavers (should) build on rivers."

The funeral march during the Odra disaster of August of 2022 was a sombre event that mourned the loss of the river as a viable habitat, provider of livelihoods and site of mental, physical, and spiritual renewal for humans. At the same time, some activists stressed that it was not really the end of the river, but the end of old, exploitive concepts toward waterways (Siotry Rzeki, 2022). Nevertheless, contemplating the compounded losses of such “haunted hydroscares,” in the form of commemoration creates spaces for transformation. Waterways, especially riverbanks and other places where land and water meet, possess a profound liminal quality (Garden, 2016, p. 93; Sanders, 2017; Weaver, 2022).<sup>8</sup> As such, they are often sites of transformative experience, especially when heightened by a recognition of loss (haunting). Many activists and anglers-turned-activists describe the profound sense of loss and grief they experienced when confronting the massive destruction of the 2022 disaster. In some cases, a sense of urgency and activism flow from scientific observation. For instance, in her online biography, one of the River Sisters describes how she first became aware about the plight of rivers while observing the disappearance of specific wetland plants when conducting research for her degree in biology.

On one hand, their themes stress mourning and loss of places of refuge and joy, through the devastation of nature and (especially non-human) livelihoods. The massive destruction of fish, mussels and snails negatively impacts the species that rely on them, including beavers, otters and many avian species (Marchowski et al., 2023). Yet ghosts or traces persist in damaged places in the form of residues (chemical, physical, and ghostly) that are left behind and through those species that remain and struggle to survive. On the other hand, River Sisters’ initiatives have more celebratory and ludic qualities, stressing the importance of experiencing joy and the pleasure of being alive and living in connection with rivers and nature. A short film that the group made about the Odra shows images from a joint “adventure” with “ice swimmers” who bathed in the Odra as an act of protest against the regulation of rivers. Figure 5 depicts how the River Sisters created fish-hats which they lent to swimmers to wear during their wintry dip, augmenting the comic or playful atmosphere of the event.

Asking engaged citizens to raise their voices on behalf of the Odra may appear to be quite different from a campaign that it be granted legal personhood, but this process of imagining the perspective of the river plays an important part in the process of increasing awareness and altering attitudes. Similarly, the more creative and experiential initiatives of the River Sisters that involve direct engagement with waterscapes are vital in generating a sense of community around a shared cause.

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<sup>8</sup> Bodies of water are also home to water beings that occupy a liminal or ‘in between’ position between various realms and worlds. See for example, Beggiora (2022) and Strang (2023).



Figure 5 - Ice swimmers wearing fish hats created by the River Sisters, January 2023. In translation, the banner reads, “Stop Destruction of the Odra” (from the film *Niech życie wróci do Odry* (‘Let life return to the Odra’), Siostry Rzeki).

Within Europe, the legal effectiveness of the landmark *Mar Menor* case remains uncertain. Some critics argue that it is not adequately clear how to situate this right constitutionally, how to implement it, and how to reconcile it with property rights. Far-right populists in Spain have challenged the new law (19/2022). Concerns about making this an effective strategy in Europe include a lack of constitutionally explicit rights for nature (Fuchs 2023). In addition, in present-day Europe, there is an absence of widely recognised indigenous cosmologies that legitimise personification of nature, as well as entrenched anthropocentrism in most institutions. Yet, others view legal recognition for the rights of nature and its arrival in Europe with hope (Adloff, 2024). When laws are in place, they provide a foundation for enforcement, for new cases, and a basis for further protest. Rights for nature campaigns, prompted in response to haunting absences, create possibilities for further recognition and expansion of nature’s rights. Moreover, the *Osoba Odra* campaign becomes an avenue for human inhabitants of this long-overlooked, after-thought of a region – that Rokita refers to as Odrzania or Odra Poland (in contrast to “Poland Poland”) – to also raise their voices and be heard, to demand that their home, this contested, haunted waterscape, be recognised and respected, instead of treated as a site of para-colonial extraction/distortion and a receptacle for industrial waste.

## Reflections

The Odra River disaster became a lightning rod issue, highlighting the multiple scandals of the PiS party, and likely played an important part in record-breaking voter turnout in autumn of 2023, in which the party was voted out of office. There is now a different Polish government, headed by a more conventional liberal and pro-EU coalition, or more precisely a coalition of coalitions, led by Donald Tusk of Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*). During its first two years in office this fragmented government, representing very diverse interests, has faced the daunting task of shaking loose a judiciary and state media captured

by PiS and their allies. To date, not much has been done to address the Odra's problems. One exception is that the new government has formed a working group to examine guidelines to grant national park status to the Lower Odra region in northwest Poland. This initiative is sponsored by multiple natural scientists and environmental groups and is also linked to the Osoba Odra campaign. Plans stalled in January this year due to opposition from the local municipality of Grafino. Its representatives have concerns about the plans hindering development and resent the notion that their lives will be dictated by Warsaw (Rośnie sprzeciw, 2025). However, more recent reports indicate that plans for the national park will continue and may go into effect this year to include those municipalities that have approved the measure (Kraśnicki, 2025).

The current government has vowed to address the Odra's problems in 2025 and in fact, in January 2025 the Osoba Odra campaign submitted a bill to the office of the Speaker of the Polish Sejm (lower chamber of parliament), which was accepted. The 'Clean Odra' (Czysta Odra) Legislative Initiative Committee will address calls for the recognition of the legal personhood of the Odra River (Aktualności, 2025). This move was a positive development for the campaign, following reports of another fish die-off on the Odra in December 2024, this time on the Czech side of the border (Vankova, 2024).

In the case of the Odra, its emerging materialities and hauntologies are inherently caught up with the displacements, traumas, and ambivalence that extend from its status as a post-war border marker. The Odra and its surrounding landscapes are a charged site, a site of hauntings, not only through its cultural and political significance, but also as a site of devastation. Ifor Duncan and Francesco Vallerani observe that:

*Rivers' trauma (physical bleakness) turns into affective trauma (psychological bleakness) when damage to the waterscapes signify change and erosion in people's sense of belonging to and identification with their inborn hydrophilia (2023, p. 4).*

Ghosts, or the remaining traces of former waterway systems become visible through the particular (Tsing et al., 2017; Pinnix, 2023). Specialists estimate that it will take decades for the Odra to recover from the calamity of 2022 (Directorate-General 2023), an event that emerged from human arrogance, disregard, inattention, and lack of care. Here too, direct, meaningful encounters with the river are essential to cultivate this now-buried awareness, shaking us up and making us pay attention to the landscapes and waterscapes that sustain us. In the context of this contested region, searching for, listening to, and acknowledging its complex, varied traumas – cultural, historical, and environmental – can also provide a source of healing. By learning to be attentive to local and regional changes, lingerings, and absences, we can decipher what they attest. Their residues reveal overlooked stories, entangled communities of being, some of whom are lost and some who remain, struggling on into uncertain futures.

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