

# River writing and “the tyranny of beginnings:” Autobiographies along rivers

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## Abstract

Many contemporary autobiographical texts that depict a transcultural self prominently feature waterscapes in the foreground. The present study focuses on how rivers are functionalized in two autobiographical accounts: the essayistic *Flodernas bok* (*The book of rivers*, 2012) by the Swedish poet and essayist Nina Burton, and the autofictional novel *Am Fluß* (2014) by Esther Kinsky. Both combine the literary representation of travels along rivers with an exploration of European cultural history, but also the history of the self.

Using Schmitz-Emans’s (2008) concept of ‘water writing’ for studying ‘riverlike’ writing modes and discussing the findings against the backdrop of research on the cultural significance of water, this article demonstrates how both texts challenge the presumed linearity of rivers by focusing on how they are embedded in a global circuit of waters. It shows that a river’s ability to transgress national borders makes ‘river writing’ attractive for autobiographical enterprises. Finally, both texts emphasize the relationship between man and water as well as that between man and the environment through water. This relatedness of humans and landscape through the fluid element indicates that the self is not sovereign, stable and hovering above its environment, but rather an embedded entity, interwoven in complex fluid networks of interaction.

**Key words:** transculturality, water writing, rivers in literature, autobiography, contemporary literature

## 1 Introduction

In recent decades, numerous literary texts have foregrounded waterscapes as autobiographical writings exploring a culturally hybrid self. Ilma Rakusa’s *Mehr Meer. Erinnerungspassagen* (*More sea, Passages of remembrance*, 2009), may be regarded within this setting as an autobiographical account in which the self is metaphorically conceived as a continent formed by oceans, rivers and lakes with the ability to transform or even overflow land, but also to connect the mainland of the self with other continents (Karlsson Hammarfelt 2016). Similarly, waterscapes are foregrounded in Christoph Ransmayr’s autobiographical mapping of the self, titled *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* (*Atlas of an Anxious Man*), 2012. Here, the possibilities and shortcomings of cartography and narration as means of ‘capturing’ and representing a fluid self are reflected within the narrative discourse, but also on the book cover, resembling a map in blue, suggesting that the *Atlas* of Ransmayr’s “anxious man” presents an attempt to map fluid landscapes.

Autobiography scholarship has observed that though autobiography is traditionally associated with an accentuation of temporal dimensions of life, contemporary autobiographical writing increasingly foregrounds *spaces* of experience and structures the autobiographical narrative spatially (Holdenried

2000: 46). But our spaces of experience, the geographies of humans’ daily life, are at present constantly reshaped by transnational flows of goods, people and information. The experience of living in “liquid times” (Bauman 2007) and of a world in which “national borders – and the cultures, politics, and frameworks of understanding that they are imagined to contain” appear as “more porous than ever before” (Herrmann et al. 2015: 1) might be one reason why waterscapes attract the attention of contemporary authors and artists. The present study is situated within this context of fluidity and autobiography in times of transnationalism and focuses on how rivers are depicted and functionalized in two contemporary autobiographical texts: the essayistic *Flodernas bok* (*The book of rivers*, 2012), written by Swedish poet and essayist Nina Burton, and the autofictional novel *Am Fluß* (*By the river*) written by German author and translator Esther Kinsky and published in 2014. Both combine the narrative representation of travels and wanderings along rivers with an exploration of and reflections on not only cultural history, but also the history of the self, its sources, and the paths it has taken. In Burton’s text, this self is explicitly autobiographical, whereas Kinsky’s novel can be regarded as a fictionalized autobiographical narrative (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013: 9f.), a format that is according to Holdenried gaining ground in the contemporary literary landscape (Holdenried 2000: 35).

On the one hand, these texts are writings *about* water, depicting fluid landscapes and investigating the multifaceted ways in which human life is dependent on and connected to water. On the other, they also imitate movements, sounds, and dynamics of water by literary means, using for example onomatopoeic language, a stream-like narration, literary structure or layout to form a ‘poetics of water.’ They can therefore be regarded as examples of *water writing* in the two distinct meanings defined by the comparative literature scholar Monika Schmitz-Emans:

Anyone dealing with “water writing” should be aware of this distinction as it also implies the opportunity to distinguish between different types of “water literature”, a first group consisting of those extremely numerous and multifaceted texts which provide descriptions or communicate experiences, impressions, and ideas related to water, a second group consisting of such pieces of literary art as [sic!] dedicate themselves to the “writing modes” of water itself, regardless of their concrete form. (Schmitz-Emans 2008: 37)

Similarly, Burton and Kinsky employ “writing modes” of water, especially rivers, and explore the literary potential of streams, deltas, riverbeds, the movements of tide, and the sounds of water streaming and flooding through a landscape, in the context of tracking a culturally hybrid self on the move.

With their thematic focus on rivers and the literary implementation of their “writing modes,” these texts share common interests and characteristics with the Danube writings of Claudio Magris (*Danube: A sentimental journey from the source to the Black Sea* [Ital. orig. 1986]) and Peter Esterházy (*The glance of countess Hahn-Hahn. Down the Danube* [Hung. orig. 1991]). These different river biographies all recall and play with different river and stream metaphors that have, as shown by Blumenberg, been pivotal in occidental philosophy and culture; such

as the stream of matters in antique atomism, the stream of time, and, in modern philosophy and literature, the stream of consciousness (Blumenberg 2012: 109, 139, 152). A difference between Burton's and Kinsky's works, and Magris's and Esterházy's prototypic river writings, is that the question of 'Central Europe' that is, as observed by Edgar Platen, essential to Magris and Esterházy (Platen 2016: 79) is not foregrounded in Burton's and Kinsky's texts. Arguably, the latter are situated in a different geographical, political and historical time frame and can be interpreted as attempts at grasping a culturally hybrid self, tracking its history and its movement through a world in which "global interactions and intersections are more distributed, diffuse, and diverse than they ever were before," and where "power, people, and finance [...] flow intra- and interregionally, cutting across and partially superseding imperial and postimperial circulations" (Herrmann et al. 2015: 3). Words such as *flow*, *circulation*, *movement*, *multidirectionality*, and *detritorialization* are often used to depict these developments and point to the shortcomings of "methodological nationalism" (Beck 2007: 286) as well as of binary "center-periphery models," (Appadurai 1996: 32) when it comes to grasping the dynamics of the contemporary global cultural economy. The cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai investigates the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flows that he terms *ethoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*, using the suffix *-scape* in order to

point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterize international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles. These terms with the common suffix *-scape* also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to face-groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer. (Appadurai 1996: 33)

This passage indicates that not only are the global flows identified by Appadurai in motion and permeable, but likewise is the individual that navigates through, experiences, and co-constitutes them. The dynamic relationship of the individual to flows of humans, goods, information, and capital is explored in the two 'river biographies' of this study. Hence, the topical question of our analysis will be how rivers take form and perform as components of autobiographical writing in a "poly-centered, multiple, and complex" world, in which the subject is "no longer one, whole, unified and in control, but rather fluid, in process, and hybrid" (Braidotti 2006: 8f.).

The approaches outlined above indicate a shift in how not only space and the spheres of life and experience are conceived, but also subjectivity. This transition can be related to transformations in literary accounts of the self and thus calls for a revision of the traditional concept of autobiography. This term was defined by

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Philippe Lejeune as “the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune 1989: 4). In practice, however, numerous formats of autobiographical writing have developed, especially from the 1960s onward, that problematize the notion of personal identity (Holdenried 2000: 23). This development has led to a revised understanding of what autobiography is. According to Ulrich Breuer and Beatrice Sandberg, autobiographical writing is today characterized by three distinguishing features:

First, it not only comprises autobiographies, but also letters, diaries, travelogues, poems, dramas and novels. Second, it no longer presumes a stable border between fiction and reality or between literature and non-literature, but explicitly embraces border-crossings. And third, it no longer draws on the assumption of stable identities, but at best on a construction of identity through writing and reading. (Breuer & Sandberg 2006: 10f. Transl. LKH)

Within this scope of autobiographical writing, Holdenried differentiates between writing formats that are oriented toward narration, including memoirs and the autobiographical novel, and those oriented toward a reflective-essayistic mode of writing such as diaries, letters, and the autobiographical essay (Holdenried 2000: 35). In terms of the texts under consideration here, Kinsky’s novel can be regarded as an example of the former, though it also contains essayistic elements, and Burton’s as an example of the latter. They both fall out of the scope of Lejeune’s definition, which, as Roger Woods states, “expressly excluded [...] memoirs, biographies, personal novels, autobiographical poems, journals, diaries, self-portraits, and essays” (Woods 2010: 3). Nevertheless, they present intriguing material for determining how processes of globalization and cultural hybridization are depicted and problematized in contemporary autobiographical – narrative as well as essayistic – accounts of a self on the move.

## 2 ‘River writing’ in Burton’s *Flodernas bok*

In the introduction of her *Flodernas bok*,<sup>1</sup> Burton classifies her book as her “third journey” in a passage that introduces not only the text in focus here, but also its author and her previous works:

Again, for the third time, I have travelled out in the world to gain a new image of Europe. Once poetry was my compass to different cultures and languages. [...] Back then I called my *Atlas Sister of Traveling, Poetry*. At another occasion, I was guided through Europe by creative and researching women, because I needed female role models. They broadened history for me and were all collected in *The New City of Women*. This time, I want to follow the veins that have made Europe pulse with life, and that are also part of my life. I want to write the book of rivers. (Burton 2012: 11f.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The book has not yet been translated into English; all quotations hereafter are author’s own with the Swedish original source quoted in footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> “För tredje gången har jag rest ut för att få en ny Europabild. En gång var poesin min kompass till

Rivers, according to Burton, interweave “authors, artists, drinks and dragons, bridges and family ties” (Burton 2012: 16)<sup>3</sup> into a symphony. But also, the life of the author and of Europe appear in her book to be interconnected through water and the three rivers depicted: the Rhône, the Rhine, and the Thames. The ability of water to connect all life on the planet is thus emphasized already in the introduction; along with its capacity to change its state of aggregation and to bind other substances, because, as Burton states, “water is never satisfied simply being H<sub>2</sub>O. It is the best solvent in the world, one you can rarely find clean, because it constantly reaches out for other substances” (Burton 2012: 13)<sup>4</sup>. Also humans are interconnected with their environment through water and its capacity to bind: According to cultural historian Hartmut Böhme, humans’ manifold connections to water, our dependence upon it, and the fact that the human body consists to a considerable degree of water, unveils the separation of subject and object that constitutes the basis of modern science as a construct that has led to an alienation of water and nature in order to make them technically disposable (Böhme 1988: 11). Burton also accentuates the kinship between humans and the environment through their ‘wateriness’, which to her means that the water itself is involved in the writing process: “Also I consist of two thirds water, as do the fish and the earth itself. It is in my eyes and my hands as I write the history of rivers and with every word it trickles through the windings of my brain” (Burton 2012: 13)<sup>5</sup>. Reflections like these regarding the writing process and the relationship between water and storytelling are especially explicit in the introduction, but recur throughout *Flodernas bok*, as suggested by chapter titles such as “Fishermen’s histories”, “Written on the water”, or “The riverbed narrates” (Burton 2012: 172, 293, 346)<sup>6</sup>.

Burton understands the assignment of writing the history of rivers as a process of condensing “years of searching into one long journey” (Burton 2012: 16)<sup>7</sup>, again alluding to water’s capacity to change its state of aggregation and accentuating the importance of movement for her writing. The text is not structured around a plot and its characters, but written in the typical hybrid mode of an essay, the – according to Peter Zima – least standardized genre of all (Zima 2012: 6f.): Characterized by

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skilda kulturer och språk, eftersom lyrik är ett av mina uttryckssätt. Då kallade jag min kartbok *Resans system, poesin*. En annan gång guidades jag runt Europa av skapande och forskande kvinnor, eftersom jag behövde kvinnliga förebilder. De vidgade historien för mig och samlades sedan i *Den nya kvinnostaden*. Den här gången vill jag följa de ådror som fått Europa att pulsera av liv, och som även har del i mitt liv. Jag vill skriva *flodernas bok*.”

<sup>3</sup> “De rör författare, konstnärer, drycker och drakar, broar och familjeband.”

<sup>4</sup> “[F]ör vattnet är aldrig nöjt med att bara vara H<sub>2</sub>O. Det är världens bästa lösningsmedel som sällan finns rent, och som ständigt sträcker sig efter andra ämnen.”

<sup>5</sup> “Även jag består till två tredjedelar av vatten, precis som fiskarna och jorden själv. Det finns i mina ögon och händer när jag skriver *flodernas historia*, och med varje tanke sipprar det genom hjärnans vindlingar.”

<sup>6</sup> “Fiskarhistorier”, “Skrivet på vattnet”, “Botten berättar”.

<sup>7</sup> “Jag måste dricka deras liv och hitta beröringspunkter med dem medan jag komprimerar år av sökande till en lång resa.”

“non-identity, openness, experience, awareness of ambivalence, self-reflection, contingency, constructivism, and dialogue,” it oscillates between melancholy and utopia (Zima 2012: 29. Transl. LKH).

From Zima’s point of view, the question of the possible/impossible urges authors to an essayistic, thus open, ambivalent, and self-reflective writing mode, characteristics that also apply to Burton’s essay. *Flodernas bok* combines the exploration of Europe’s history along three of its great rivers with an autobiographical project structured spatially along the streams, namely the individual quest for roots and understanding of a hybrid self on the move. Searching – as Burton herself states in the introduction – for “a new image of Europe” (Burton 2012: 11)<sup>8</sup>, the writing project further encompasses an enterprise that makes the text fluctuate between melancholy and utopia, conflict and reconciliation, and past, present, and future. Hence, Burton’s work can be regarded as essayistic and intertextual in the way Zima describes, interweaving autobiography with essayism.

The depicted rivers have, as Burton states, formed not only Europe’s but also her own life in various ways (Burton 2012: 17). At the same time, however, these rivers, depicted individually, take on a representative function: “Together they represent all streams that have carried the shifts of history, the thoughts of life, and the adventures of the present” (Burton 2012: 17)<sup>9</sup>. Burton starts out in Switzerland and follows the Rhône from the Rhôneglacier to the Mediterranean, thereby partly traveling in the footsteps of her mother, a musician and former student at the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva. The author alludes to the traditional affinity between water and music, but also explicitly refers to Jaques-Dalcroze’s theories on the interplay of melody, rhythm, time, and life (Jaques-Dalcroze 1988: XI) that were introduced to her by her mother, to whom life was “like the melody, a variation with identity” (Burton 2012: 45)<sup>10</sup>, but also rhythm, expressed in our heartbeat, pulse, breath, days, and years (Burton 2012: 41). Thus, filtered through the conception of the author’s mother, Jaques-Dalcroze’s theories shape Burton’s *Flodernas bok*, in which water stands for both variation and consistency, or for the consistency of change that characterizes rivers (Blumenberg 2012: 135).

### 3 The Life-giving nerves of Europe and the self, and their deceptive sources

Burton’s preoccupation with origin can be regarded as a typically modernist trait of her writing, which constantly returns to the question of origin, imagined “as a winding center one can never completely let go of” (Burton 2012: 32)<sup>11</sup>. The author compares her own search for roots and identity to the eels that come to life in the Sargasso Sea, and from there start their journey toward the rivers and lakes of

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<sup>8</sup> See original quote in footnote 2 above.

<sup>9</sup> “Tillsammans får de representera alla de strömmar som burit historiens skiftningar, livets tankar och nuets äventyr.”

<sup>10</sup> “Att det precis som melodier är en variation med identitet.”

<sup>11</sup> “Jag tänker mig ursprung som ett vindlande centrum som man aldrig helt kan släppa taget om.”

different continents, steered by an “origin unseen” (Burton 2012: 32)<sup>12</sup>, and the question is posed whether it is possible that a “water stream shapes the character of a family” (Burton 2012: 44)<sup>13</sup>. But the text also repeatedly accentuates that man has not only one origin, but numerous ones, and is consequently not formed by only one watercourse. And though oriented along three big European rivers, the seeking of traces in *Flodernas bok* splits up into a plurality of runnels, including inter alia the vivid Råne River in north Sweden, and the still canal in the Danish town of Odense, near which Burton’s maternal grandparents grew up (Burton 2012: 43f.). Thus, a tension between the notion of origin and that of mixture or hybridity can be observed here that is preserved throughout the book.

The author also notes at several points that what she expected to be the source of a certain water stream turns out to be nothing but a deceptive waypoint. Consequently, the imagined origin is constantly deferred or displaced. For example, the source of the Rhine, the lake Lai da Tuma, which turns out to be “nourished by uncountable runnels from precipices upstream. And they are in turn nourished by rain” (Burton 2012: 123)<sup>14</sup>. So the author asks herself: “But why this tyranny of beginnings? Is it not a simplistic way of seeing?” (Burton 2012: 123)<sup>15</sup>. While exploring the riverscapes of Europe and her family history, the traveler’s attention is increasingly drawn toward seemingly insignificant rivulets, and the interaction between tributary streams and the main river. Contrary to how rivers and lives are often conceived in a linear manner, as a line of development stretching from one source to the water mouth, from origin to death, Burton draws attention to the manifold beginnings, mazy courses, and splintered, delta-shaped mouths of rivers, that is: to their labyrinth-like character. Likewise, when she travels along the Thames in the last chapter of *Flodernas bok*, searching for another source of her life in the country in which her father took his first steps, Burton reflects on the hybridity of rivers and origins. Seeing the many unknown feeders of the Thames, the Swedish author reflects on the role of her English surname and fatherly legacy:

Again, I think of my own origin. Never would I change the name I received at my birth to a different one. It is part of my identity. But am I not just as much a Hansen like my maternal grandmother and a Fahleson like my grandfather, and a Lewis or a Hamlin like my paternal grandmother? No doubt. One has half of the genes from one’s mother and half from one’s father, who have in turn inherited half from their mother and half from their father and so on in uncountable ramifications backwards. And the further I move back in time, the more the fatherly part of me is watered down by a manifold nameless motherly inheritance. It is the song of tributary streams that sings the strongest in me [...]. (Burton 2012: 261)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Att styras av ett osett ursprung – liknar det ålarnas långa resor mot floder som deras anfäder sökt?”

<sup>13</sup> “Är det möjligt att ett vattendrag kan forma karaktären i en släkt?”

<sup>14</sup> “[D]en närms av ett otal rännilar från stupen högre upp. Och de i sin tur har närms av regnen.”

<sup>15</sup> “Men varför denna börjans tyranni? Är det inte ett förenklat sätt att se?”

<sup>16</sup> “Omigen tänker jag på mitt eget ursprung. Jag skulle aldrig byta mitt medfödda efternamn mot något annat. Det är en del av min identitet. Men är jag inte lika mycket en Hansen som mormor och en Fahleson som morfar och en Lewis eller Hamlin som farmors föräldrar? Jo, utan tvekan. Man har

Hence, though carrying only one family name, Burton’s origin appears to be just as mixed as the rivers she explores in traveling and writing, and the tension between identity and variation that is addressed in the passage above can be traced as a central theme throughout *Flodernas bok*.

In the Rhine chapter, this tension is linked to questions regarding the interplay between nationalism and art. Traveling along the Rhine, Burton refers to Johan Gottfried Tulla and his project of straightening and deepening the mazy course of the river from Basel to the German town Worms in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a reach in which floods had before this comprehensive enterprise destroyed several villages and taken lives. The straightening of the Rhine can be regarded within the context of extensive efforts of regulating German marshlands and waterways from 1750 onward that David Blackbourn investigates in *The conquest of nature: Water, landscape, and the making of modern Germany* (2006, also referred to by Burton). Blackbourn illustrates how these efforts are related to the process of nation-building (Blackbourn 2006: 18), and also in *The book of rivers*, Tulla and the project he represents are associated to the establishment of a German national identity that Burton scrutinizes on her journey. Regarding her own transnational family history, which is not separated but rather kept together by the Rhine as a connecting element, the author speaks of her growing reluctance to national borders and finds it “disconcerting that the river has in the history of Europe often been regarded from a national perspective” (Burton 2012: 137)<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the river and the self have not only a multiplicity of sources in common, but also a life course that stretches across national borders, and are often “regarded from a national perspective.”

#### **4 Rivers as national identity markers and the cultural hybridity of the arts**

The notion of networking canals and rivers is highlighted over and over in Burton’s *Flodernas bok* and often associated with the cultural hybridity of the arts. When visiting the above-mentioned town of Worms and reading names of streets and buildings, the author states that the town has “linked its identity completely to the *Nibelungenlied*” (Burton 2012: 184)<sup>18</sup>. She reflects on the role of Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen* in the Third Reich while at the same time calling attention to the fact that the epic is also about Burgundies, Huns, and Icelanders (Burton 2012: 186). Here, she highlights that at the time of the premiere of the famous opera cycle in 1876, an English version of the story appeared, William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung and the fall of the Nibelungs* (1876), which later became an inspirational

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hälften av generna från sin mamma och hälften från sin pappa, och så vidare i oändliga förgreningar bakåt. Och ju längre bakåt jag går i tiden, desto mer späds den faderliga delen ut av namnlösa mödraarv. Det är biflodernas sång som sjunger starkast i mig [...].”

<sup>17</sup> “Därför känns det [...] irriterande att floden i Europas historia ofta setts ur ett nationellt perspektiv.”

<sup>18</sup> “Men Worms har knutit hela sin identitet till Nibelungensagan.”



source to *The lord of the rings* (1937–1949). Both traditions are reunited in the bookstore of Worms:

When I walk through the bookstore of Worms, editions of the *Nibelung* and fantasy books inspired by Tolkien stand closely next to each other. That something that has almost been a national epic could have such an international impact calms me, and it also accords better with the historical core. [...] What I am reminded of in Worms is thus what can happen if one forgets that history is a mixed texture. (Burton 2012: 187)<sup>19</sup>

That the influence of “mixed texture[s]” on art in general and literature in particular plays a central role for the literary scholar, essayist, and poet Burton is not surprising. Burton emphasizes biographical ‘tributary streams’ that are often neglected in literary and cultural history writing, especially in the case of artists, authors, and works regarded as important building blocks of a national cultural heritage. She reflects on how landscapes around the Rhône inspired Petrarca “although Italians prefer to remain silent regarding [...] where he made his essential experiences” (Burton 2012: 85)<sup>20</sup>. A corresponding passage accentuating the importance of Lake Geneva and the Rhine, but also Paracelsus, for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) presents another example of how art and literature are presented as transnational textures:

But the work of the Shelleys [Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley; LKH] does not only reflect the Thames. Mary Shelley started to write *Frankenstein* during a storm at Lake Geneva, where the idea for the protagonist came from one of my Rhinian Faust models, Paracelsus. Mary Shelley’s own Rhine trip was also incorporated into her book, before it was completed in Marlow. (Burton 2012: 328f.)<sup>21</sup>

Burton’s *Flodernas bok* can likewise be regarded as a transnational text, interconnecting three European rivers and the life and cultures along their shores, both with one another, and with other water streams. As Platen observes in his analysis, the three rivers depicted by Burton are constructed as one (Platen 2016: 85). When returning from the mouth of the Rhône to Switzerland, to continue her journey alongside the Rhine, Burton imagines how the sources of both rivers are fed from the same rain cloud (Burton 2012: 123), and on the ship from Rotterdam to England she falls asleep and wakes up in the harbor of Harwich, thus missing the fluid interspace between the rivers: the North Sea (Burton 2012: 245).

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<sup>19</sup> “När jag går genom Worms bokhandel står utgåvor av Nibelungensagan tätt intill Tolkieninspirerade fantasyböcker. Att något som nästan varit nationalepos kunnat få så internationella verkningar känns lugnande, och mer i linje med den historiska kärnan. [...] Vad jag påminns om i Worms är alltså hur det kan gå om man glömmer att historien är en blandad väv.”

<sup>20</sup> “[T]rots att italienare helst tiger om [att det var] här han fick sina avgörande upplevelser”.

<sup>21</sup> “Men makarna Shelleys verk speglade inte bara Themsen. Mary Shelleys *Frankenstein* började skrivas under ett oväder vid Genève sjön, där idén till huvudpersonen bland annat kom ifrån en av mina Rhenska Faustförebilder, Paracelsus. Mary Shelleys egen Rhenfärd införlivades också i hennes bok, innan den fullbordades i Marlow.”

Correspondingly, on the inside cover of the book, the three rivers are drawn on a map as one black line, an axis stretching from southern to northern Europe. This is significant for understanding and defining the role of rivers in contemporary autobiographical writing about a self on the move. Throughout the text, Burton constantly calls attention to the fact that her life, like Europe’s, is a “mixed texture” with manifold sources, intertwined in complex ways. Thus, the linear conception of life as a journey can in the case of rivers, as in human lives, only exist as a construct by means of language and signs, like this black line on the map.

### **5 Fluid Networks of the Self: *Am Fluß***

Turning from Burton to Esther Kinsky’s novel *Am Fluß*, published in 2014,<sup>22</sup> it is striking that Kinsky – as opposed to Burton, but also to Magris and Esterhazy – is not primarily concerned with one of the major European rivers, but instead structures her novel around the River Lea, a tributary stream that flows into the Thames in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The peripheral character and location of the river between the city and the countryside fascinates the protagonist and first-person narrator, who is herself in an interstitial phase of life. Having left her apartment in central London and about to move to Hungary, she bridges the gap between two life chapters in a cheap accommodation in the eastern suburbs of London. Though peripheral in relation to the Thames, the River Lea forms the center of the narrative, but the protagonist’s walks along the riverside also arouse memories of other rivers that are portrayed in chapters of their own. Often, these tributary narrative streams depict encounters with strangers from different parts of the world, who engage in a dialogue with the protagonist, telling her about *their* rivers. These memories diverge from the main stream of narration and form nodal points at which self and other, familiar and unfamiliar convene. Thus, also here, water is primarily regarded as a connecting element, tying continents, humans, and cultures together.

One of the first memories aroused by the River Lea is that of the Rhine, the very first river in the life of the protagonist (Kinsky 2014: 36). In his Danube biography, Magris distinguishes between the meanings that have been ascribed to the Rhine, such as German virtue and confrontation with other cultures, from the role traditionally played by the Danube as a connector of different cultures, peoples, and languages (Magris 2010: 30f.). Also in Kinsky’s novel, the Rhine is associated with German national identity (Kinsky 2014: 35). Kinsky uses the traditional symbolism of waterways as symbols for the passing of time, and connectors between past, present, and future (Blumenberg 2012: 139):

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<sup>22</sup> When this article was written, the English translation *River* by Iain Galbraith (Kinsky 2018) had not yet appeared; all quotations hereafter are, therefore, author’s own with the German original source quoted in footnotes.

Motion, the maelstrom in just one direction in which the water was streaming, toward an ever brighter seeming place in the north, where the plain broadened, no mountain could be seen, and only the contours of large buildings began to stand out against the white background of the sky. The barges traveling down the stream had an easy task, as they glided toward this brighter part of heaven, whereas the ones struggling their way up the river seemed heavy and black, insecure, heading toward a darker area. There, upstream, where the valley suddenly became narrow and the river did not yet seem to know anything about the sea, black-brown stumps could be seen, [...] remains of a bridge that once stood at this now bridgeless part of the river where only ferries communicated, and a reminder of the war, a word that hung in the neck of our childhood. (Kinsky 2014: 32–33)<sup>23</sup>

On the one hand a transportation route into the future, a catalyst of progress; on the other, the channel to what lies upstream: destroyed bridges and the stinking, sludgy foundation of contemporary prosperity. This is just as much a chapter about the Rhine as about the society in which Kinsky grew up at the time of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. The narrator repeatedly returns to the issue of post-war life and of how to live with the wounds of the past, a theme that reappears when she recalls a journey along the Neretva in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>24</sup> During this trip, the river and life along its shores make an ambiguous impression: on the one hand a seemingly idyllic “stoic landscape of small flows” resembling images on old china (Kinsky 2014: 224f.)<sup>25</sup> and on the other, the destroyed and divided town of Mostar, reminding one of division and conflict. This ambivalence of the river, a symbol of conflict and dissonance and, at the same time, a scenic element associated with oblivion, deceptive beauty, and peacefulness, is of central importance to Kinsky’s narrative project that explores the question of how the past molds the present from different angles.

Though European history plays a central role in Kinsky’s novel, in contrast to Burton, she also depicts waterscapes in North America, the Middle East, and Asia, interweaving them in the act of narration. Often, these connections are made visible through certain leitmotifs such as, most importantly, gold, and riverbed loam. The many allusions to gold, gloss, and royalty are entwined with intertextual references to the *Nibelungenlied*, and to Neil Young’s *After the gold rush*, but also with

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<sup>23</sup> “Bewegung, der Sog dieser einen Richtung, in die das Wasser strömte, einer stets heller wirkenden Gegend nach Norden zu, wo sich die Ebene breit machte, kein Berg mehr zu sehen war, nur die Umrisse größerer Gebäude sich gegen den weißen Hintergrund des Himmels abzeichneten. Die flußabwärts fahrenden Kähne hatten es leicht, wie sie diesem helleren Stück Himmel entgegenglitten, während die sich flußabwärts mühenden schwerer und schwärzer wirkten, unsicher, unterwegs in eine dunklere Gegend. Dort, flußaufwärts, wo das Tal plötzlich eng wurde und der Fluß noch nichts vom Meer zu ahnen schien, standen schwarzbraune Stümpfe, [...] die Reste einer Brücke, die es an diesem brückenlosen Abschnitt des Flusses, wo nur Fähren verkehrten, einmal gegeben hatte, und eine Erinnerung an den Krieg, ein Wort, das unserer Kindheit im Nacken saß.”

<sup>24</sup> In these passages, Kinsky writes herself into a literary tradition of depicting the coexistence and conflicts between ethnic groups and religions in the Balkans through literary portraits of rivers. The most famous of these is Ivo Andrić’s novel *The Bridge on the Drina* (Serb. orig. 1945); a later example is Nikol Ljubić’s novel *Meeresstille* (2010).

<sup>25</sup> “Eine Gleichmutslandschaft kleiner Abläufe”.

reflections on the consequences of greed and the human exploitation of nature. Gold and loam, on the one hand, appear as antipodes, representing (the striving for) purity and (an openness toward) mixture, respectively. On the other, the dirty and mixed deposit constitutes the natural environment of gold, and thus in a way its fundament. The gold metaphor can therefore be regarded as an ambiguous one, at the same time implying contrast and affinity towards mixture and 'impurity'.

As argued above, these two leitmotifs further function as structural connectors, tying different rivers, continents, lives, and chapters together. Thus, for instance, the brick wall banks of River Lea in east London that are portrayed at the end of the chapter "*Bow*", their "loam, grout, moss... [b]order texture" (Kinsky 2014: 310)<sup>26</sup>, represent the transition to the following chapter, "*Hooghly River*", that depicts memories and impressions from the Hooghly, a delta distributary of the Ganges in West Bengal. Here, the narrator envisions the "sediment of the river, the claybrown mud" out of which brick is produced. The depiction of the Hooghly focuses on the cycle in which the deposit turns "from river to earth to loam to artifacts, to brick, household utensils, and sculptures of gods, that all fell apart again, dissolved and were given back to the river" (Kinsky 2014: 314f.)<sup>27</sup>.

The polluted, increasingly salty river supplies Calcutta with water and supports the industry of West Bengal. Its harbor constitutes a nodal point in the network of global trade; at the same time, the river is part of 'Mother Ganges', that is considered holy by the Hindus. These different functions and character traits of the river are also intertwined in Kinsky's portrait, which highlights selected parts of the Ganges to explore a *topos* central to Burton's text, namely, how human life is embedded in and influences the hydrological cycle.

Böhme notes that water knows no borders and not only travels the world in a complex natural cycle, but "in each moment also flows through the bodies of all humans and creatures, as well as the bodies of societies, houses and industries, cities and villages," so that the anthropogenic life cycle is inevitably incorporated into and affects the natural cycle of water (Böhme 1988: 9). This also means that different continents are interconnected through water, as the German literature scholar Ortrud Gutjahr highlighted in a lecture held shortly after the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in east Japan in 2011, in which she stated that this catastrophe raised to awareness of the extent to which "humans are interlinked through the world embracing ecosystem of oceans: What happens on far away coasts and in foreign waters, will sooner or later land next to us" (Gutjahr 2012: 10).

In the context of envisioning the life cycles of humans and waters and their manifold interconnections within Kinsky's narrative project, loam and brick play a central role as products of water's capacity to bind other materials and substances,

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<sup>26</sup> "Lehm, Mörtel, Moos. Randtextur."

<sup>27</sup> "Der Bodensatz des Flusses, der tonbraune Schlamm, war in ständiger Bewegung, wurde vom Fluß zu Erde und Lehm zu Gegenständen, zu Ziegeln, Hausrat und Gottesfiguren, die alle wieder zerfielen, sich auflösten, dem Fluß wieder anheimgegeben wurden."

another behavior of water central to understanding Burton’s poetic engagement with rivers. Loam develops in an interaction of the globally circulating element of water and local particles of earth and pieces of rock in their individual constitution. Regarded this way, brick is the product of an interaction of the global and the local, and thus always has an individual color and disposition, as the narrator explains in the following passage toward the end of the novel:

The big city of London is built upon a network of countless rivers of varying age. ... The sludge of every subterranean river has a different color and carries a different story. That is why the bricks of London have more colors than those of any other city in the world. (Kinsky 2014: 346)<sup>28</sup>

Correspondingly, Kinsky’s text and the self it depicts can be said to be built upon a network of countless rivers that are intertwined in multiple ways. When the protagonist observes the brick wall of her provisional home before departure, it appears to her as a scripture “into which the history of the last couple of months was inscribed” (Kinsky 2014: 347). Thus, also in this autofictional account of a life stretching across national borders and continents, the river as a model of thought, experience, and writing is not primarily imagined in its linearity, but in its branching, connections, and capacity to tie materials, experiences, and continents together. Further, Kinsky’s novel follows a similar pattern as the depicted River Lea, meandering through the eastern parts of London, thereby continuously touching different shores, memories, stories, rivers, and lives, suggesting that human lives are interconnected with one another and embedded in the global circuit of waters. Something seemingly peripheral, a short, transitory phase between many years in London and a new life to come somewhere else, forms the center of the novel, the thread that ties different stories and encounters together into a complex network representing a self on the move.

## 6 Conclusion

The two examples of autobiographically oriented “river writing” explored in this article carry several common traits: it is striking that though both allude to rivers, a geographical reality generally regarded as linear and a symbol of a linear understanding of time and human lives, these texts develop strategies that challenge the traditional, linear conception of rivers. The rivers represented in the two texts are embedded in a complex circuit of waters flowing through and between continents, mixing with earth, and shaping landscapes as well as humans. Most importantly, Burton’s and Kinsky’s rivers permanently explore ways of interacting with other substances. Both texts allude to the actual as well as metaphorical function of rivers as a defining border between cultures and a symbol of division

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<sup>28</sup> “Die große Stadt London ist erbaut auf einem Netz unzähliger Flüsse unterschiedlichen Alters. [...] Der Schlamm eines jeden unterirdischen Flusses hat eine andere Farbe und trägt eine andere Geschichte. Deshalb haben die Ziegel von London so viele Farben wie die keiner anderen Stadt auf dieser Welt.”

and conflict, also by referring to bridges as results of human attempts to bridge gaps and overcome differences (Simmel 1957: 2f.). But what de Certeau refers to as the “paradox of borders” (de Certeau 1988: 233) implies that these can always be regarded both ways – as separators but also as connectors – and in Burton and Kinsky it is the moments of encounter that are favored when it comes to tracking the meaning of rivers in the life of the self that is explored in writing. Not only are the sources of rivers generally nourished from other waters as Burton suggests, but also, as stated by Edgar Platen, it is apparent that “the river does not end at the water mouth, but that its water connects its own space with all oceanscapes” (Platen 2015: 57). The self that is mapped in the two texts can be regarded as a hybrid one, whose course of life and family history stretch over national borders. Hence, it is, firstly, the ability of water to connect and transcend land(s) that is accentuated and that makes ‘river writing’ attractive for autobiographical enterprises. Especially in Burton’s text, it becomes apparent that the cultural hybridity of the arts and of European societies is not new, but rather a forming trait of culture and of humans who have, since the beginning of time, been mobile and seeking to connect and interact with others.

Secondly, both texts emphasize the relationship between man and water as well as the relationship between man and the environment through water. In *Das Bad* by Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada, whose literary work also revolves around water and cultural hybridity, the narrator states in the first sentence of the book: “The human body is said to consist of eighty percent water, thus it is no wonder that a different face shows up in the mirror each morning” (Tawada 1993: unnumbered). Later in the book, she adds another, corresponding observation: “The globe is said to be seventy percent covered by water, thus it is no wonder, that the earth’s surface shows a different pattern every day” (Tawada 1993: unnumbered). This correlation and relatedness of humans and landscape is also of central importance in the two texts in focus here, in which the subject that is mapped in language is not sovereign, stable, and hovering above its environment, but rather an “embodied and embedded entit[y] fully immersed in webs of complex interaction, negotiation, and transformation with and through other entities” (Braidotti 2006: 154). Furthermore, according to Braidotti, “[s]ubjectivity is a process that aims at flows of interconnections and mutual impact” (Braidotti 2006: 154).

Thus, water is not simply functionalized in these two texts as a metaphor for connectivity and transnational flows, but as a physical, material reality. To explore water is to explore the self and its multifaceted interconnections with the environment; and, thus, also, are rivers focused in these autobiographically oriented accounts, seeking to map out a permeable self on the move, interwoven in complex transnational networks of interaction.

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