

Water as a Biopolitical Actant

Davide Montanari

Politecnico di Milano, Italia

Abstract Drawing from the hydrofeminist perspective proposed by Astrida Neimanis this contribution assumes the Po River as the subject of its practice of care and calls for a recognition of its ecological rights as body of water. To do so, the reflection questions the persistence of policies that reduce water to a mere resource – measurable, scalable, thus controllable and productive – thereby translating ecological risk into a renewed form of capital expansion. The great renaturation plan of the Po River will be the paradigmatic case and object of this critique.

Keywords River as a subject. Biopolitics. Hydrofeminism. Po River. Water bodies.

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1 Introduction

Situated at the intersection of a biopolitical methodology for landscape studies, hydrofeminist perspective, and in dialogue with the Rights of Nature framework, this contribution investigates how bodies of water may be understood not merely as resources to be managed, but as more-than-human subjects of ecological, political, and juridical concern, focusing on one of Italy's most exploited rivers: the Po River.

Throughout history, water functioned as the fundamental element that has systematically structured, organised, and rationalized the landscape of the Po Valley along with its political, social, and ecological processes (Swyngedouw 2004), portraying the story of a pervasive process of exploitation of resources, with the definition of a Palimpsest of Appropriation (Cavaliere et al. 2020). By examining this complex body of water, it appears clear that the water apparatus has significantly contributed to both physically shape a specific landscape and at the same time act against it, due to an ever-growing process of commodification of the hydraulic resource.

To better understand this double and opposite dynamic of production of both landscape and risk, it is necessary to consider the geographical dimension of the Po River at the scale of its hydrological basin.

A first key feature of the Po basin is the asymmetry between its northern and southern part. The Po receives water from the Alpine arc and from the Apennines, but these two systems contribute in profoundly different ways. On the Alpine side, waters are accumulated in large lakes and in glacial systems, and they tend to reach the Po with a relatively regular and abundant summer flow, following snowmelt and seasonal release patterns (Fiocca, Lamberini, Maffioli 2003). This regularity has historically supported stable irrigation regimes and helped orient agriculture toward water-dependent forms of production.

On the Apennine side, by contrast, the tributaries are typically shorter, often with irregular and violent discharges, and they carry significant sediment loads. Their waters are rich in alluvial transport - fine materials such as marls, clays, and silts - that accumulate across the lower plain and produce a fragmented micro-topography: ridges and depressions, stagnation areas, wetlands, and *valli* with difficult drainage. This condition explains why the Po basin has historically been governed through a double imperative and shaped through two distinct modalities of landscape-making (Fiocca, Lamberini, Maffioli 2003): in some areas, water must be brought, distributed, and made productive through the construction of a diffuse network of canals; in others, it must be evacuated, drained, and contained by developing a set of drainage infrastructure and dams.

From the second half of the fifteenth century until the advent of steam-powered pumps, the excess water that rendered vast areas of the lower plain agriculturally unproductive was addressed through practices that [...] should more generally be understood as forms of water governance. (Fiocca, Lamberini, Maffioli 2003, 17)

This dual condition is a geographic reason – before any political argument – for why the Po has become a landscape of both irrigation and reclamation, of both distribution and exclusion, of both water as resource and water as threat.

Across the Po Plain, water governance did not begin as an abstract science. It began as a situated intelligence: a repertoire of collective tactics developed to live with floods, to reclaim saturated ground, and to make drainage possible in a territory where water tends to linger. At the core of this practical knowledge was a simple but powerful recognition: the most reliable way to move water at scale is not to fight it head-on, but to work through its basic driver: ‘gravity’ (Fiocca, Lamberini, Maffioli 2003). Channels, diversions, settling basins, and protective works were mastering water through redirecting its forces, steering erosion away from vulnerable edges, and guiding deposition toward places where it could be tolerated or made useful.

The stratification of the complex hydraulic works across the centuries mentioned above, served as an active catalyst for a series of extreme environmental events that have radically affected the stability of the hydrological network. In light of the mounting risks produced by the crisis of water, a range of overlapping and sometimes conflicting visions has been mobilized. In particular, the Po River restoration program – framed within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) – constitutes a paradigmatic case for interrogating the complex nexus between space, life, and politics.

As the processes of ecosystem alteration defined by centuries of human-induced modification are clearly shaping the uncertain boundaries of a new climatic regime (Latour 2018), we witness a complex saturation where strategic plans, agendas, and aspirations – thus a multiplicity of perspectives and political positions – structure the contemporary debate on climate resilience and environmental policies. Within the wider framework of the European Green Deal (2019) and the Nature Restoration Regulation (EU) 2024/1991, the Plan for the Renaturation of the River Area (2022) delineates one of the most extensive processes of environmental restoration, declaring an

ambitious goal of drawing up a plan of restoration of nature in order to improve the state of health of the existing protected zones and bring back a variegated and resilient nature across all typologies of landscape and ecosystems: to do so [...] it is also

necessary to support the rehabilitation of nature. (AdbPo 2022, 25)¹

By dwelling onto this statement, the perception of an opaque entity approximately defined as nature begins to emerge, unravelling the limits underlying the renaturation paradigm. By a further examination, the set of design actions displayed by the project appears to foresee a constellation of interventions where nature is envisaged as a subject detached from human stratifications; as if “‘nature’ is merely the uncoded category that modernists oppose to ‘culture’” (Latour 1998, 238).

The complex conditions we are living, marked by the intensification of extreme environmental phenomena and by the growing inadequacy of western binary thought, claim the necessity of a new theoretical and design framework able to overcome the outdated dualistic language that defines concepts in binary such as nature-culture (Descola 2005). In this sense, the land-water distinction can be framed as another binary underpinning river discourse. Far from being a neutral geographical distinction, this binary may be understood as a culturally produced construct of Western thought, through which water is rendered extractable and subordinated to terrestrial regimes of use, planning, and infrastructure. Yet, as landscape architect Dilip da Cunha argues, this division did not exist in the first place (da Cunha 2018). Rather, it is a conceptual and cartographic fiction through which Western spatial rationalities have imposed planning systems, developed infrastructures, and determined where water is allowed to be. Such a logic operates against the hybrid status of landscapes and against their continuous processes of hybridization.

Through this position, the investigation utilizes the hypothesis of reframing the Renaturation Plan as a counter-project to deploy the possibility of “Water as a body [...]. Entity, medium, transformative and gestational milieu” (Neimanis 2012, 87), able to erode the binarism which structured the western system of thought. Water as living entity/extension (Peters, Steinberg 2019) capable of conveying a specific hydro-logic (Neimanis 2012, 86), a precise operational rationality, to be deployed within the design of space. Designing through Water implies the acceptance of leaks, porosity, and wetness as spatial concepts functional to operate an epistemological shift in the action of conceiving, designing, and shaping both the physical and normative space. Within this context, how to exit from the notion of nature as an entity that exists a priori and start a process of decolonization of water itself (Da Cunha 2018)? Can we explore the possibility of watery transition as a theoretical and active position working with complex water rationalities and bodies of water that

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

overlay the biological, technological, and social layers (Escobar 2008) and generate spatial concepts that embrace the hybrid subjects, constantly intertwined with human and technological stratifications? Can the hypothesis of a watery transition of the Po River build a theoretical and operative framework able to shape an affirmative biopolitical action able to reposition the design practice from the perspective of water, thinking through and from the water's liquid materiality and exceedance (Peters, Steinberg 2019)? How might such a watery transition be articulated as a Rights of Nature claim, namely as a political and representational grammar capable of reconfiguring who and what can be protected, made visible, and made to count within river governance? To answer these research questions and highlight a trajectory of study, the article proceeds to open multiple trajectories of investigation, which configure themselves as small provocative notes composed by a textual form and accompanied by operational drawings that aim to complete what words cannot describe. The original drawings produced by the author are assembled as a small *carnet de dessin* of the Po River. They function as a counter-cartographic device, interrogating multiple episodes and dimensions of the river, from the institutional geography of the consortia to the ecological, infrastructural, and spatial practices generated along the basin.

Rather than functioning as mere collections of drawings, the *carnet* represents a form of artistic approach to research that aims to construct situated knowledge through the simultaneous use of writing, cartography, and figuration. As such, the *carnet* constitutes an initial step toward a counter-project for the Po River. To think as a body of water – by intersecting hydrofeminist perspectives with landscape studies – requires recognizing the river not as a bounded object defined by its visible or drawable margins, but as a relational and generative body; it means indulge and act with leaks and spills. The river must therefore be traced in what exceeds its apparent form: in the spatial practices it enables, in the infrastructures that capture and redirect it, in the territories it irrigates and floods, in the institutions that govern it, and in the more-than-human assemblages it continuously produces.

2 Towards a Hydro-Critique

By assuming the Restoration of the Po River as an opportunity to delve into the notion of counter-project, the contribution explores its statute through a critical reading of its ontological foundations as well as the design actions generated from the latter. Counter-project can assume many forms and outcome, and the counter-project this article aims to look at is the one related to a practice of counter-cartography

through drawings able to interrogate or make visible aspects for which water has been treated just as a mere resource [figs 1-3] or other type of representation where the weak subjects takes the first place [figs 4-5].

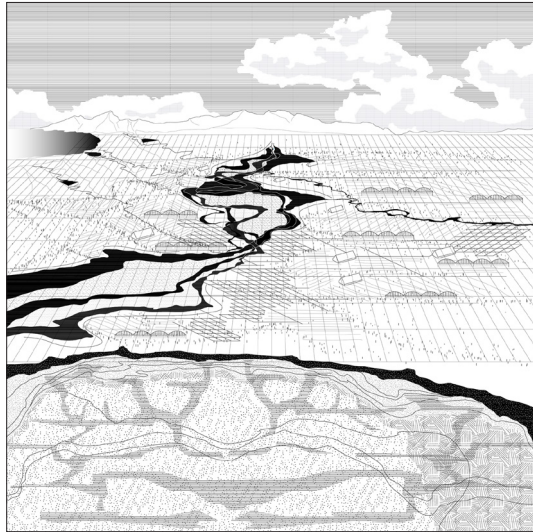


Figure 1
Davide Montanari,
Watery Fresco. 2024.
Digital drawing,
2479 px × 2479 px.
© Davide Montanari

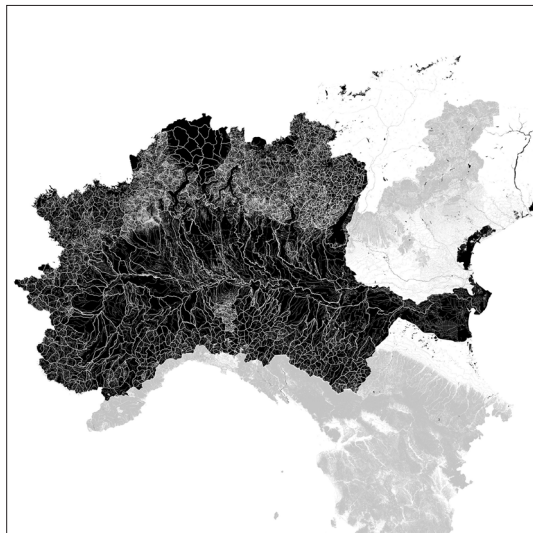


Figure 2
Davide Montanari,
Discipline and Produce. 2024.
Digital map,
2479 px × 2479 px.
© Davide Montanari

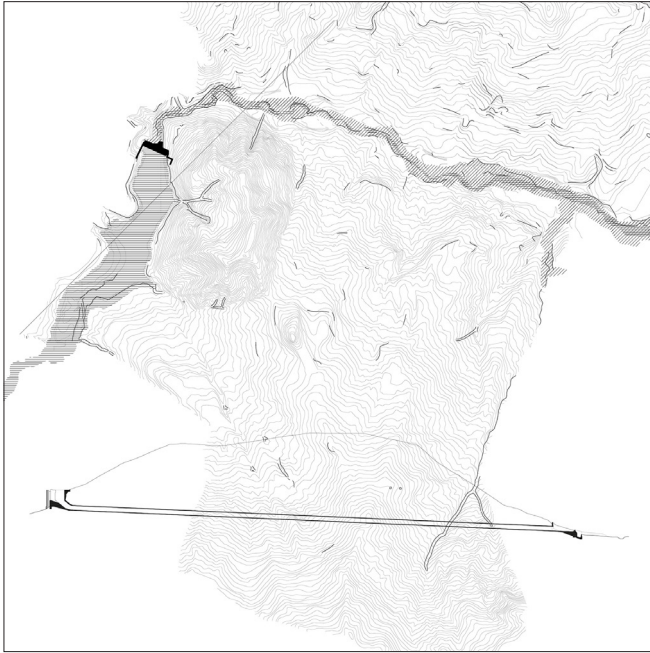


Figure 3 Davide Montanari, *Theatres of Hydraulic Exploitation*. 2024. Digital drawing, 2479 px × 2479 px.
© Davide Montanari. The title evokes the theatrical nature and aesthetic of hydraulic machines, well represented in the book *Le diverse et artificiose machine* by Agostino Ramelli. The exact date of publication remains uncertain; some sources suggest it may have been around 1588. More information and the complete publication with drawings can be found at https://archive.org/details/gri_33125009356607

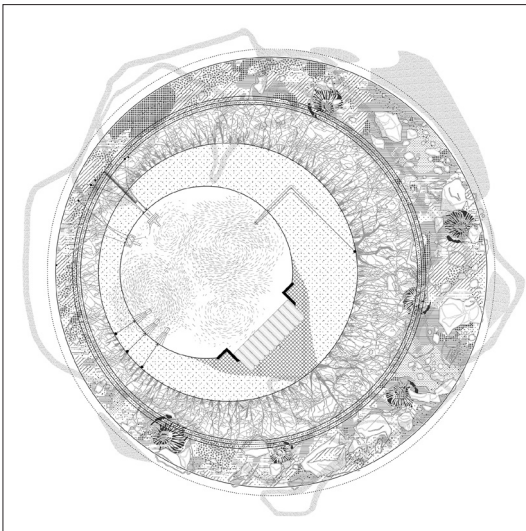


Figure 4
Davide Montanari,
As Above, So Below.
2023. Mixed-media
drawing, hand-drawn
and digitally processed,
2479 px × 2479 px.
© Davide Montanari



Figure 5 Davide Montanari, *Po River as Living Subject*. 2023. Mixed-media drawing, hand-drawn and digitally processed, 300 cm x 59,4 cm (for publication purposes, the drawing is presented here through two selected portions of the original artwork).
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Drawing on the objectives expressed by the project, it is possible to perceive the potentiality of a radical approach. Through hydro-morphological interventions paired with forestation and renaturation actions, and precisely: by targeting the reactivation of abandoned riverbanks and former branches, mitigating the artificiality of the watercourse, and implementing an extensive reforestation process, the project of renaturation of the Po River configures itself as a potential radical policy where the objective is to “reactivate natural processes and facilitate the recovery of biodiversity, while ensuring the restoration of the river” (AdbPo 2022, 25). By turning of the consolidated hierarchies – which locate the human life over other forms of existence, together with the proposal of a reduction of human privileges over other forms of life, the aspirations of the project have the power to question the status-quo and stretch the consolidated norms of designing space. This alone could be recognized as a first attempt toward an affirmative biopolitical action (Esposito 2004; Cavalletti 2005): the preoccupation for life (Foucault 2004) extends its boundaries to the non-human (Morton 2017; Bennett 2010). Yet, the biopolitical question is relentlessly controversial and opaque.

To put this provocatively in another way: one could argue that the primary actions of interventions are oriented toward restoring the ecological state of the river by conserving the more-than-human forms of life that have been long-term erased by a consolidated process of

river exploitation. But to what extent are these interventions truly oriented toward ecological restoration? And more importantly: what do they restore? More precisely, it is a matter of extracting protection (Cavalletti 2005): the restoration paradigm, which shapes its epistemological foundation, is still deeply tainted by a modern paradigm where nature exists and functions according to a specific utility. Water and its surrounding environment, in this sense, have always worked as innocent extractive resources. Moving from this perspective shift, appears clear that the interest for what is more-than-human is still deeply “tainted by an anthropocentric and often white supremacy” (Viganò 2023, 12), where the action of restoration could be interpreted as the desire of producing new economic values derived from the ability of restoring and increasing the ecological performance of the space. The desire of potentiating the ecological performance of the space through non-human life “is because for us it would be better” (13) to act on an extractive paradigm where landscape is supported to perform. This is why it seems that this plan is still embedded in a modern paradigm which promotes “a separation between the world of humans and the world of nature” (58) where ecology becomes a new frontier of capitalist production.

It appears clear, from these trajectories, that the theoretical foundation of this apparently radical project draws a moralistic trajectory: by analysing the objectives expressed by the project, and the strict limitation of interventions, it seems to rest on a traditional paradigm which aims at ‘saving nature’. The increase of ecological performance thus occurs by restoring the nature condition, creating a norm. I propose to read the Po River Valley without avoiding its intrinsic complexity but rather accepting the overlapping of multiple, intertwining and sometimes contradictory conditions.

3 Scales of Power: The River as a Biopolitical Production

We drew the waters from the deep beds of rivers and from marshy hollows, and dispersed them over the arid plains. Following the ancient conduit, [...] we are met with this spectacle: where water passed, grass stretches out; where it comes to a halt, the dark, scorched land begins. (Cattaneo 1844, 28)

The words of Carlo Cattaneo describing the construction of the Po River Plain in the nineteenth century seems tracing a condition not distant from the present. Contemporary practices of water abstraction continue to shape the water landscape of the Po River, revealing the persistence of a spatial rationality that still considers space as mute, a mere “support” (Viganò 2023, 111), whereas space

is a “collective product” (111) that encompasses relations between multiple forms of life. But it also collects a constellation of power relations and should be interpreted as “a political construction” (111), with a strong normative body. At a time when survival on a contaminated planet has become a central condition of the present (Haraway 2016), an exclusively human-centred perspective is no longer sufficient. Theoretical discourse must therefore be situated within a more-than-human framework, capable of accounting for the entanglements among human bodies, nonhuman beings, technologies, and ecological processes. Thus, we need to overcome the binarism which structured modern epistemologies and explore the body of the river as a compound mixture (Latour 1998) where the human and the more-than-human overlap and generate new and unknown forms of life.

I introduce at this point the terms *Sympoiesis* and *Holobiont* to sustain the argumentation. Starting from the first term, utilized by Donna Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) – sympoiesis describes “complex dynamic systems” (Haraway 2016, 61) in which “symbiogenesis is an irreversible feature” (61), and where “nothing makes itself” (61). Within this vision, the Po River is configured as a unique and never-ending sympoietic process where “each organism changes in response to ecological interactions, thereby reshaping its environment” (Brown 2016). In this sense, the river should be seen through its ability to act as an active socio-techno-natural system built from more-than-human interrelations.

Second, the concept of the holobiont further unsettles the idea of the organism as an autonomous and self-contained entity. It describes living beings as contingent and dynamic symbiotic assemblages, composed through relations among multiple organisms and environmental agencies (Tsing 2015, 37; cf. Haraway 2016). In this sense, the holobiont foregrounds life as a process of co-constitution and co-evolution, rather than as the expression of isolated individual bodies. The Po River should be seen as a “dynamic combination and combination of combination” (37). These two terms together, can drive the possibility of conceptualizing the Po River as a socio-techno-natural body of water, where the more-than-human is a fundamental and active part of the river itself.

3.1 The Po River as Techno-Nature

Space is made by opaque stratifications and assemblages (Tsing 2015) of ecological, technological, social, and cultural layers. These entangled processes shape a techno-nature (Escobar 1999): a hybrid and contaminated form of nature intertwined with human stratifications. In this sense, the river is also a cyborg, a region of space with liquid and porous borders – an area of continuous resistance and transformation – capable of leading to a “political and epistemological retake” (Braidotti 2011, 17), the ability to reveal the saturated and relative meaning of categorical epistemologies. Cyborg and techno-nature are both operative theoretical devices and design figures which activated cause a generative change to “think through the boundaries” (Haraway 2016, 12) and their porosity, and thus to perceive landscapes beyond dualities.

3.2 Po River as a Biopolitical Subject

“Water is...inherently political [...] because of its material imbrication in the socio-technical formations through which we produce, reproduce and live socionatural natures” (Bakker 2012, 618). This massive normative body has control over the myriad of “interrelationship[s] between water technologies, [...] processes of social power and the construction of identities and subjectivities” (Swyngedouw 2004, 25). Water is the medium that entangles together “individual bodies to the collective body politic” (25). The different age of humans and their varying socio-technical formations are embedded within the body of the river, where water acts as “the basis for the origin of power and meaning” (25). The body of the river is thus a biopolitical subject “in the Foucaultian sense: modern governments seek to optimize both the reproductive and productive capacities of populations and individuals” (Bakker 2012, 619). The river as a biopolitical body means that the spatial and water’s biopolitical apparatus becomes an active and crucial part of this process. Its infrastructure has always aimed to increase the well-being of the population and to render its bodies productive.

The Restoration Plan is in this sense a paradigmatic case of the biopolitical dimension of the Po River, and of water as a medium for power relations and capitalist extractive processes. It portrays a new water and ecological era in which the objectives aim to define a new paradigm of restoration and water governance. In the plan, the protection of human life is extended to more-than-human forms of life, while at the same time producing new forms of capital production. Throughout the different phases of its development, the project has drowned into an abstract normative space built by the study of

feasibility and flexibility of interventions, focusing on the cost and possible performances of each operation. The landscape of the river is thus entirely framed within this body of economic knowledge. It is in this realm of power-play that the river is encoded as a mere blue surface (Peters, Steinberg 2019) without looking at the existing techno-socio-natural process, and its agency as a holobiont. It is the space in which risk and vulnerability are absorbed by the capitalist production and become a new frontier for future capital production.

The arguments outlined draw a site-specific cartography that calls for a reset in the methods with which landscape is read, practiced and designed, thus a call for a counter-project. Any future desire of transformation of space must accept the world as a big sympoietic process, as a collective process of becoming with the other (Haraway 2016), by acknowledging the non-human as an active life-form.

3.3 Po River as a More-Than-Wet Body of Water

Drawing from the positions previously outlined, framing the landscape as a subject (Corboz 1983) opens the possibility of envisioning the Po River as a laboratory for affirmative biopolitical action and, potentially, for Rights-of-Nature imaginaries. As this written contribution is an opportunity to test a set of concepts developed within the author's ongoing doctoral research, with malleable borders that will evolve taking other forms, instead of formulating a conclusion, aware of the impossibility to delineate a fixed answer, I want to open a trajectory.

This perspective seeks to advocate for the possibility of conducting an affirmative biopolitical action; thus, conducting landscape-making practices, by moving from the feminist provocation expressed by Astrida Neimanis of hydro-feminism, using the hypothesis of becoming bodies of water, to realize a watery transition. The body of water is a figuration (Braidotti 2011) that drives the comprehension of the river as a nomadic subject (Braidotti 2011) resistant to power relations and able to transcend its physical boundaries. Not inscribed in the administrative limits of human rationality, but rather a shape-shifting holobiont that continuously produces situated and site-specific cartographies (Braidotti 2011). The hypothesis of hydrofeminism is a practice that facilitates the vision of the Po River beyond its tangible materiality: a body that "spill and leak [...] a materiality that exists beyond the liquid, blue spaces on the map that are marked as 'water'" (Peters, Steinberg 2019, 295) a category of space reframed through a more-than-wet ontology (Peters, Steinberg 2019).

In a present increasingly shaped by extreme environmental phenomena, conceiving water as an active spatial subject enables the articulation of site-specific hydro-logics. Such an approach

shifts attention from water as a resource to water as a relational force that participates in the formation of bodies, communities, and landscapes, thereby opening “new ontological understandings of body and community” (Neimanis 2017). Like water, the notion of counterproject – with its generative power – stretches and questions the current status quo, and its application is instrumental in order to redefine the restoration process of the Po River as an affirmative biopolitical action (Esposito 2004; Cavalletti 2005; Viganò 2023) and as a practice of political representation capable of shaping the mesh occurring between life and the spaces of water of the twenty-first century.

The counterproject I want to propose is on the one hand a more-than-wet transfiguration of the existing liquid materiality of the Po River, and on the other a watery transition where “in acknowledging this corporeally connected aqueous community, distinction between human and nonhuman start to blur” (Neimanis 2012, 92), disclosing our essential state of bodies of water. The artworks contained in this essay constitute an initial effort to develop a broader counter-mapping project. This approach advances a rhizomatic cartographic practice designed to produce situated knowledge, repositioning the river not as a resource to be extracted but as a living subject.

The counter-project proposed here therefore begins as an exercise in counter-cartography. Its aim is not simply to represent the Po River differently, but to produce another level of hydrological consciousness by assuming water as the standpoint of inquiry. From this perspective, mapping becomes a critical practice through which the river is no longer framed as a resource to be extracted, regulated, or restored from the outside, but as a living and relational subject with its own material agencies and rights. This position intersects hydrofeminist thought, which understands bodies, waters, and communities as mutually constituted, with the Rights of Nature framework, which offers a juridic-political grammar for recognizing rivers and ecosystems as subjects of protection and representation. The drawings included in this essay constitute a first attempt to develop such a cartography. As a small *carnet de dessin*, they collect and connect heterogeneous episodes of the Po River – its infrastructures, institutional geographies, ecological disturbances, hydraulic practices, and more-than-human relations – In order to trace the river beyond its margins. In doing so, they establish the preliminary ground for a broader counter-project: one that begins from the rights of water and uses drawing as a situated method to make the river visible as a subject, rather than as an object of management.

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