

Hydrosensory Autoethnography Sensing Belonging and Governance in Anthropogenic Waters of Limburg, Belgium

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Abstract Is it possible to bodily sense how water is governed? By framing belonging as a practice that is intimate, situated, and ethically attuned to the More-than-Human, I reflect on how institutional constraints on waters essentially reduce the possibilities for belonging to the water's edge. This paper introduces hydrosensory autoethnography as a method for sensing such constraints from within. Through encounters with three post-extractive lakes in Limburg, Belgium, where proximity to water is controlled, heavily restricted, or even prohibited, I trace forms of intimacy that remain available in the fractures of what governance leaves open.

Keywords Sensory ethnography. Belonging. Water. Water governance. Hydrofeminism. Posthumanism. More-than-human.

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1 Introduction: On Belonging and ‘Mining’ Waters

Water is a recent subject in my life. At least, from a research stance. I moved to Belgium from Italy, where I spent a decade studying design and working in the sociocultural sector. I had just completed my studies with a thesis on diasporas, their linguistic openness, and a futile sense of belonging in border regions. This was in part a tribute to my nomadic condition. Then I was offered the opportunity to do research on the intersection of design and democracy, specifically in the domain of water governance. I have never really worked on environmental topics, and bluntly speaking, I sincerely thought it was too late to start.

I remember scoping European projects on water, and the Confluence of European Water Bodies was one of them. This was last year, and I was eager to attend their gathering in Amsterdam. After a brief email exchange on whether it was possible to participate in their activities, I received a respectful ‘no’ (with an exception for a couple of open events, one of which I managed to attend). In my mind, the way to participate would be to find a waterbody I could represent, I could confluence with. Which waterbody do I relate to? Often, people who work with water are invited to speak for and with oceans, seas, rivers, lagoons, or lakes. Participation assumes that such a relation can be clearly named. For me, this was not self-evident. Still, I began searching for one, for a waterbody I could call ‘mine’.

Here, the question of belonging felt relevant again: this time not to the nation-state, but to Nature. My understanding of this belonging indeed fell into a rather Western duality: Nature as something pristine, somewhere out there, that I need to search for, to dig deeper into (Marris 2013; Morton 2007). I found myself nostalgically reminiscing about the waterbodies that surrounded me throughout life. The Баренцево море (Barents Sea), where I was born: its waters fed by the Gulf Stream, never freezing through the northern winter. The Волга (Volga), where I swam as a child, not in the river itself but in a small lake formed in its meanders, surrounded by the fields covered in white clover [fig. 1]. Later, I inhaled the waters of Нева (Neva) through the humid, saturated air. Many other waterbodies: the Milanese Navigli, the Atlantic Ocean, the rivers Tejo, Po, Talfer and Eisack, Senne. All of them contributed to my belonging, all of them held me (Bates, Moles 2023).



Figure 1 The small lake formed in the meanders of Волга. 1997.
Федоровка (Fyodorovka village, Tolyatti, Russia).
Photo by the Author's father. Family archive,
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These thoughts left me without a clear answer to the question of ‘my’ waterbody. Instead, they made me ask whether belonging is, at all, a matter of proximity. Perhaps it lies elsewhere? Even if most of the waterbodies I described above are distant today, I remember what it felt like to sense the cold breeze on my skin, to taste the fruits growing on their banks, to walk barefoot on the shore and feel the wet ground beneath my feet, to smell stagnant and salty waters, to submerge in them. I remember it all, my body remembers it all.

Today, my research takes place in Limburg, Northern Belgium, a province marked by post-mining ecologies. The mining industries are long gone, but they shaped these landscapes as we perceive them today (Tsing 2017). Old mining pits left in disuse were filled with groundwater, forming a number of sporadic, relatively small lakes that characterise the region. One can hardly notice them on the map, and many have become recreational sites with restricted access. Are they big enough to be represented? Do they matter? And if so, why haven’t others already chosen them to confluence with?

I was genuinely intrigued by these lakes. They represented to me possibilities of nurturing a relationship with what is altered, damaged (Shotwell 2016; Tsing et al. 2017). Their waters opened to me forms of belonging that I could identify with, intentionally exploring connection to sites that we humans have broken and given rise to at the same time (Evers 2021; see also Lora-Wainwright 2017). And, most interestingly, today these waterbodies have become sites

for strictly regulated governance exercises in environmental and water management, which I return to later in this work.

In this paper, I introduce my first – and rather humble – encounters with these troubled, Anthropocene waters (Neimanis 2017; see also Linton 2010). They led to an experimental method I call ‘hydrosensory autoethnography’. In landscapes where intimacy with water is physically enclosed, it becomes a way of staying with water, sensing constraints from the attuned and situated position, and cultivating intimate relationships with More-than-Human (MTH) worlds where still possible. In principle, this approach asks what ethnography can do when relations with water are mediated by regimes of water governance.

The paper unfolds in several steps. I first position my work within a broader theory on belonging and intimacy in the Anthropocene, to then reflect on the proposed method as a way of sensing waters from a personal, situated position, informed by sensory and posthumanist approaches. I then elaborate hydrosensory autoethnography as a methodological response to sense MTH relations under conditions of constraint. This is followed by an empirical section where I describe my encounters with three anthropogenic waterbodies in Limburg, Belgium – Paalse Plas, Lommelse Sahara, and the Kikbeekbron. To close, I critically reflect on my own experience and open a discussion on how to govern waters in the Anthropocene more ethically and intimately.

2 Theoretical Grounding: Possibilities of Belonging in the Anthropocene

I am not alone in a troubling desire for belonging. At the same time, I realise that questioning one’s belonging to Nature and feeling an urge to search for natural elements that one could relate to is, in itself, a largely Western concern. In the Anthropocene, the age of an unprecedented human impact on the Earth, we are made to believe that our separation from Nature is, paradoxically, ‘natural’. This is often justified through dominant narratives that claim we have reached a “mastery of nature” – of a supposedly passive, voiceless, and obedient surrounding that gains value primarily through extraction and human survival (Plumwood 1993). Hence, our interactions with all ‘natural’ are controlled and, most of the time, highly extractive. What types of relations might emerge from such a conviction? If connections with Nature, with the MTH, with water are structured primarily around domination, what does this mean for the possibilities of belonging that remain?

My understanding of belonging here is closely related to the work of Gibson-Graham (2011, 5), who argue that politics of belonging

remain profoundly human-centered, with Nature still framed as a resource and valued mainly through functional and economic logics. In their critique of this separateness, and of humanity's limited capacity to empathise with those who share the Earth with them, they reflect on alternative avenues for connection that involve both "sensory and intellectual receptivity". They specifically layer two intertwined ethical projects: one that calls for "actively connecting with the MTH", and another that recognises human-MTH relations as 'material configurations' (see also Bennett 2010). Both suggest a new idea of belonging, nurtured by the ethics of love, care, and attunement to the MTH, rather than ownership or control. The latter, in particular, builds on Bennet's vision of connection as a shared, material identity, where a singular 'me' dissolves into a complex web of relations. Hence, identity and belonging are no longer constrained to the human individual.

This understanding of belonging as a practice of care and responsibility resonates with the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), who reflects on whether one can "become indigenous" to a place where one is not native, where one remains a stranger, a foreigner, an immigrant. She asks, "What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home?" (2013, 207). Drawing on the lessons of Nanabozho, a half-human, half-spirit figure from Anishinaabe storytelling, Kimmerer reflects on how relationships with land might be restored in contemporary Western societies, where spiritual connections to place have largely been lost. Crucially, she insists that "No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land" (2013, 213). Yet she also suggests that a stranger may still "enter into the deep reciprocity that renews the world", cultivating care and responsibility for the land and waters, for those who were there before, who share it today, and who will come after. And while Kimmerer's work insists on the impossibility of replacing Indigenous relations to land, it does not deny the possibility of practising this belonging otherwise.

In my understanding, this relationship of care and responsibility is inseparable from a sense of intimacy with the MTH, and particularly with water. Kath Weston writes: "When most people think about intimacy, ecology is not the first thing that comes to mind" (2017, 7). In the Anthropocene, however, building connections through intimacy - or 'new intimacies' in the words of Weston - becomes especially important precisely because such connections are increasingly obstructed. Feminist scholars have argued that intimacy with landscapes can emerge through deep, sensuous engagement: by moving beyond admiration from an outsider's perspective and recognising, instead, its complexity, noticing the small things, and imagining oneself as an integral part of a shared world. Dare and Fletcher (2021, 3), for example, focus on the concept of intimacy as

essential for “earthly survival”. They argue that thinking with intimacy not only offers ground for reflecting on the “interconnectedness of human-nonhuman relations”, but also helps to center care “for each other and the earth” as the pillar of these relationships. Similarly, Boon, Butler, and Jefferies (2018, 54) write that “Intimacy with the land – through touch, spirituality, and emotion – helps individuals connect not only to nature, but to themselves and their communities” (see also Simpson 2013, 7; Million 2009).

If intimacy is understood as a form of deep connection with oneself and with the MTH, it aligns closely with the possibilities for belonging proposed by Gibson-Graham (2011). Importantly, this intimacy is not abstract. When extended to the ‘wet’ dimension, belonging and intimacy become explicitly material, since we are ourselves bodies of water. As such, we are dependent on what Astrida Neimanis (2017) calls the ‘hydrocommons of wet relations’, where connections between human and MTH bodies move beyond bounded entities and flow across and through them. Water, in this sense, is not simply ‘out there’ as an external object of relation, but something that composes us and binds us together among ourselves and the Earth through shared material processes.

At the same time, intimacy in Anthropocene waters cannot be taken for granted and should be addressed delicately. These waters have long been obedient to humans. Till this day, they suffer extraction and pollution,¹ and are made to be confined and feared. Boundless closeness or an obsessive pursuit of knowing (Neimanis 2023) can easily turn into an unethical, once again extractive relationship that disturbs the worlds that are not made for us humans to feel intimate with. After all, I discuss intimacy with waterbodies that were not meant to exist (at least, in the present form). Intimacy should not become a fantasy (Tsing 2017; Neimanis, Phillips 2019). Here, I resonate with what Neimanis (2023, 30) calls ‘estrangement’, a practice of ‘otherwise knowing’ that resists the desire, the fantasy to know more. If we know – we assume mastery. Instead, we should be guided by forms of intimacy that explicitly refuse mastery and intentionally “keep some things strange”, unknown, unseen. Estrangement carries two more orientations: acknowledging the presence and value of other worlds and a recognition of the situated

1 I do not extensively discuss pollution in this paper. As made reflect by a reviewer, my understanding of pollution, contamination and impurity reads negative – something I indeed absorbed throughout life. At the same time, Indigenous scholars such as Liboiron (2021) critique pollution as a form of colonization, inseparable from the extractive logics that this paper also traces. I am still entering this conversation. For now, I see pollution as a troubling condition (Haraway 2016) that, nevertheless, I commit to co-living with every day (hence, the rationale behind this work) (for more discussion see Shotwell 2016; Tsing 2017).

nature of this practice – “what is strange for one body is an intimate and proximal knowledge for another” (Neimanis 2023, 32).

Neimanis discusses estrangement on terms of Nature. As this paper shows, however, the estrangement can also be experienced on terms of institutionalised practices and policies that preclude forms of intimacy and belonging, where both themselves become governed from above. With an ambition to master, to control, waters become objects of governance of the institutions that themselves struggle to belong and, instead, regulate how (if at all) intimacy can be experienced by others.

3 Governing the Senses

This paper is situated within broader doctoral research on the intersection of design and MTH governance, conducted in the specific context of water governance in the region of Flanders, Northern Belgium. Water has long occupied a central position in the region's political imagination, mainly as a problem to be managed. Centuries of human-led landscape transformations in the service of agricultural productivity and urban expansion have severely affected the region's capacity to 'deal' with water. In response to the miraculously avoided catastrophic flooding of 2021 (that hit the neighbouring region of Wallonia), Flemish regional governance started rethinking the institutional and infrastructural logics on which water management has long relied (*Weerbaar Waterland* 2022).

Most recently, the Flemish government launched a strategic water policy plan formalised as the New Blue Deal (*Blue Deal 2025-2029* 2025) – a roadmap for making Flanders more resilient to the water-related effects of the climate crisis. Beyond the technical water goals, the document emphasises the importance of coordinated action across multiple agencies and scales: from the European Union to watershed-based local coalitions of farmers, municipalities, environmental organisations, and civil society actors. MTH actors also have a role in the most recent articulation of the New Blue Deal. Water is positioned not as a problem to be solved but as a collaborator in decision-making – a discursive shift that, if genuine, would represent a meaningful reorientation of governance logics.

The Blue Deal is a serious attempt at ecological reform, yet in its current form, as most institutionally-led water management initiatives, it remains largely 'dry' – affectively disconnected, techno-managerial in its reasoning, and structured around the administration of risk rather than the cultivation of MTH relations (Obukhova, Boon, Huybrechts 2026). In line with Weberian tradition, many still believe that governance should remain apolitical and value-neutral, and should merely engage in a meticulous search for

the ‘optimal’ solution to a given problem (see Du Gay 2000). There is a deep irony here: the control-based techno-managerial rationality that the water governance deploys to repair ecological damage is itself a product of the same mechanistic worldview that, as Merchant (1989) traced, first reduced Nature to a problem awaiting a solution. Even if we observe a rising interest in MTH actors being formally considered as policy collaborators (see also the Rights of Nature movement), the institutional structures remain distant from these mostly symbolic decisions (Van Bommel 2024; Immoivilli et al. 2022). MTH actors are still largely reduced to maps and plans, flattening the living complexity of their ecologies (Huybrechts, Obukhova, Boon, forthcoming).

What this governance cannot (by design) accommodate is the question of belonging. Not belonging in the administrative sense, but in the sense explored in the previous section: the possibility of cultivating ethical, embodied relations with the MTH worlds it inhabits. Intimate governance seems hard to imagine, but if water is already recognised as a decisive actor in policy decisions, perhaps it is not entirely out of reach (Fernández de Córdoba Farini 2025)? At the same time, water governance is not yet estranged by the waters themselves, as it still falls into a mastery mentality, expressed in instructive prohibitions and limitations that I describe in the empirical section. They limit possibilities for belonging. Hence, the practice of estrangement falls into a bureaucratic trap, as it is no longer guided by the MTH, but by institutions that prioritise knowledge rather than ‘otherwise knowing’.

My call is not to reject institutions or their technocratic logics, but to experiment with practices that expose their limits and cultivate what they currently lack. The good intentions are already there, but what is missing are affective capacities, without which such intentions remain futile and, in fact, dangerous, risking falling into extractive patterns. This calls for a rethinking of water governance as a practice that should include forms of sensory learning and reflexivity (Harris 2021). One in which policymakers could learn to relate to the MTH more intimately and ethically: not only manage water from above but learn to sense it from within, bodily experiencing the outcomes of their decisions. Can intimacy, in this sense, become the next institutional practice?

In the next section, I introduce hydrosensory autoethnography as a form of ‘sensing with’ waters, sensing the consequences of dry governance. Intimacy – as an attentive, embodied, and ethical orientation towards the MTH – could be a mode through which belonging may still be practised in the Anthropocene. Yet the challenge remains of how such intimacy can be enacted under conditions of limitation. And how can it eventually transform into a solid pillar of ‘wet’ regional policies (Obukhova, Boon, Huybrechts 2026)?

4 Methodology: Hydrosensory Autoethnography

Hydrosensory autoethnography is grounded in sensory ethnography (Pink 2015; Vannini 2024), autoethnography, particularly posthumanist autoethnography (Brisini, Simmons 2022; Adams, Holman Jones, Ellis 2022), and hydrofeminism (Neimanis 2017). In this section, I will place the method within existing scholarship and anticipate how it can address the need to explore how intimacy, belonging, and access to water are experienced and governed in the Anthropocene.

4.1 -sensory -ethnography

Originating in Paul Stoller's (1997) work on 'sensuous scholarship', sensory ethnography as a research strategy was outlined by Sarah Pink (2009; 2015). It follows a phenomenological approach to senses (see also Merleau-Ponty 2005), centralising the researcher's own positioning, bodily reflexivity, and sensory subjectivity as sites (or mediums) of knowledge. Building on Pink's work, hydrosensory autoethnography views the senses as interconnected and relational, grounded in embodied and situated ways of knowing. This framework understands experience through the "relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment" (Pink 2015, 28). Importantly, every researcher should be aware of their own sensory subjectivity (one's own sensory culture, background, etc.), and critically reflect on how sensory experiences unfold in intersubjective encounters with other bodies and environments.

At the same time, it is important to remain open to new, unexpected forms of knowing that the sensory interactions can provide. This is in part because the researcher's identity, as of Pink, is itself continually shaped through sensorial encounters, emphasising its contingency and its inextricable relation to the environments we inhabit. As we enter new ways of knowing and engaging with our surroundings, "our notions of self are continuously negotiated and reconstituted through our intersubjective encounters with others" (Pink 2015, 63). Vannini (2024, 6) comments on Pink's work, highlighting how an ethnographer attuned to their senses becomes a sensory apprentice, open to learning to "sense and make sense of the lifeworlds they are investigating". This take makes sensory ethnography a tangible form of 'experimental orientation', as described by Gibson-Graham (2011) in relation to belonging. This orients towards an enhanced receptiveness, willingness to see the world as a teacher and oneself as a learner – an understanding clearly inspired by Indigenous ethics.

4.2 *Auto-*

Sensory ethnography explicitly aligns with autoethnographic approaches, in which the researcher's own experiences are taken seriously. As Adams, Holman, and Ellis (2022, 3) note, autoethnography refuses the fiction of an objective "view from nowhere" and recognises that research is always shaped by the ethnographer's perspective, biography, and social position, and that the personal and the political are inseparable. The 'auto' in autoethnography implies a rigorous practice of reflexivity, but also vulnerability, as it exposes intimate life experiences with an aim to "make sense of life, disrupt unnecessary silences about uncomfortable issues, and reveal stories that haven't been told before (or told well)".

Recently, in the wake of the new materialist and posthumanist wave, both sensory ethnography and autoethnography have begun to explore what it means to position oneself as a researcher within the entrenched network of existing MTH connections (Vannini 2024; Brisini, Simmons 2022; Fijn, Kavesh 2021). This is a relatively recent turn in anthropology and ethnography, emerging initially from multispecies scholarship, which began questioning the disciplines' inherent anthropocentric tendencies by studying how relationships with other species are connected to human social worlds (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010; Hamilton, Taylor 2017; Tsing 2015; Locke 2018; Haraway 2007). The posthumanist wave takes this further. Doing posthumanist ethnographic research means recognising "humans as sensory beings-in-the-world" (Fijn, Kavesh 2021, 18), broadening the understanding of the self as relational, expanding the boundaries of the body beyond the human, and shifting attention away from social conventions alone toward the interactions between humans and MTH beings, processes, materials, and environments (Brisini, Simmons 2022; see also Descola 2014).

4.3 *Hydro-*

'Hydro' in hydrosensory autoethnography, in fact, refers to the MTH actor that undoubtedly carries diverse sensory meanings – water. Veronica Strang (2005, 102) writes that the materiality of water "offers a range of compelling sensory stimuli, and that these produce powerful aesthetic and affective responses". From a hydrofeminist perspective, Neimanis (2017) argues that human and MTH bodies are materially and sensorially connected through shared watery processes, making encounters with water part of an ongoing relational condition. Water, hence, attracts sensory and bodily engagement, and it often allows so through submerging. My own work looks at swimming as an embodied, affectively rich act of relating to the MTH

and as an inquiry into ‘wet’ governance (Obukhova, Boon, Huybrechts 2026). Maggipinto et al. (2026) discuss submersion as a form of bodily attunement and ecological care. Bates and Moles (2023, 218) compare entering a waterbody to moving across an imaginary threshold: “The closer we get to the boundary, the more ambiguity emerges, and the norms and regulations that govern how we act become more slippery”. It is about how surrendering to these waters challenges the norms of belonging through trust and intimacy.

Nonetheless, as estrangement teaches us, not all thresholds should be crossed. Waters can be out of human reach – because subterranean, contaminated, or occupied by other species – yet no less in need of care (Neimanis, Phillips 2019; Evers 2021). Swimming in this sense can be seen as an act of ecological sensibility, a way of thinking and learning about and from our relationships with water, even when physically distant. Rebecca Olive (2023) believes that choosing not to swim can be just as relational, immersed and entangled, particularly when it comes from a position of knowing not to know. The implications of entering a waterbody can be ethical as well as physical, for example, if we choose to intimately engage with sacred waters in the example of Olive, or with waters that carry histories of extraction and industrial toxicity, in my. lisahunter (2019) demonstrates how relations with water are formed not only through moments of active immersion and contact but also through seemingly mundane acts of waiting, drifting, or being near water. A “MTH watery connections”, as described by the author, becomes a significant sensory experience that might remain incomplete, but still affectively attuned and embodied.

4.4 Hydrosensory Autoethnography

My interest lies in exploring how governance, from a mastery mindset, moderates these relationships by limiting access to waters, by stretching the threshold, leaving the boundary as the only possible area for intimacy. Olive (2023, 245) compares contemporary politics of ownership and privatisation of waterbodies to the colonial mindset that treats Nature (and human beings) as a resource. I also trace similarities with the work of decolonial scholars: is it also here that one should act from the margins (hooks 1989)? If, as discussed before, belonging is understood as a relational process of sensing others and being sensed in return, then restrictions on sensory engagement also shape how belonging is lived and imagined. In such sensorially governed waterscapes, there are limited opportunities for intimacy, for forming relations with water, and for rethinking the self in relation to MTH worlds. Belonging is once again pushed to the edges, cultivated in the fractures of what governance leaves open.

Rather than seeking to overcome the boundary, hydrosensory autethnography works from within it, treating the edge – here, literally the water edge – as a site of knowledge. Despite being forced into, hooks (1989) understood the margin as a space of radical possibility: a site from which alternative ways of being can be imagined. Hydrosensory autoethnography, as a result, responds to this condition by using the researcher’s own sensory experience in relation to the MTH as an encounter through which to feel the existing constraints on waterscapes, and, through them, on belonging itself. As a method, it is simultaneously sensory, relational, reflexive, and politically attuned to the governance regimes that shape what can be felt at all. In practice, this research involved site visits to three anthropogenic waterbodies, which are described in more detail in the next section. I engaged these sites through slow, situated practices such as walking, leisurely cycling, listening, observing, and, where permitted, entering the water (still, within the limits). I paid close attention to how my movements were guided or redirected by infrastructure, signage, fences, and how these arrangements shaped what could be sensed and how. Audio field recordings were made during and immediately after visits, focusing on sensory impressions, bodily responses, moments of frustration or desire, and unexpected forms of attunement. Photographs, sketches, and sample collections helped me recall the sensorial qualities of each encounter during later stages of analysis. The translation from experience to insight was guided by movement, observation, documentation, and recursive reflexivity of these encounters.

5 Empirical Encounters: On Surveilling Senses

The region of Limburg was (and still is) famous for its extremely dry heathlands formed from sand that has been largely extracted in the twentieth century, a period of active industrialisation. In the photo archive of the botanist Jean Massart from 1911, one can find an image of the dune landscape in Lommel, near one of the sites I visited, depicting the vastness of the heathland [fig. 2]. These communal lands were once treasured by local inhabitants, while the government saw nothing but wastelands to be reclaimed for economic purposes such as forestry, mining, and agriculture, marking a shift from their use as lived commons to managed production landscapes.²

² *Recollecting Landscapes. Lommel* 53 (s.d.). <https://www.recollectinglandscapes.be/en-1904-massart-lommel-53>.

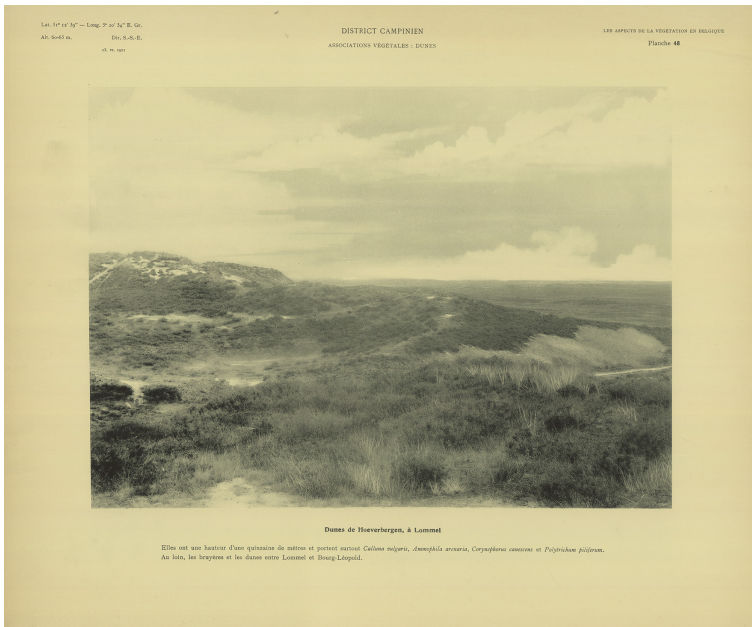


Figure 2 Jean Massart, *Dunes of Hoeverbergen in Lommel*. 1911. Photography. Lommel, Belgium. Recollecting Landscapes

Between August 2025 and January 2026, I encountered three anthropogenic waterbodies that emerged from underground in the heathlands of Limburg: Paalse Plas, Lommelse Sahara, and the Kikbeekbron. All three are post-extractive landscapes that underwent more than a century of exploitation and ecological abuse. After industrial production ceased (and after years of abandonment), the government began searching for alternative uses for these lands. Today, they represent distinct configurations of the same governance logic: post-extractive landscapes repurposed for managed recreation, ecological protection and restoration, respectively. They are promoted as “fascinating worlds where nature is in control”,³ suitable for family-friendly outdoor recreation.

From sites of industrial extraction to places of leisure and tourist attraction, these waterscapes are now governed by a different kind of control. Entry is possible, but only through designated thresholds; movement is guided along prescribed paths. Water may be seen and admired from afar, but almost never entered or touched. When

3 ANB, Agentschap Natuur & Bos (Agency for Nature and Forests) (s.d.). “Kikbeekbron”. <https://natuurenbos.be/natuurgebieden/kikbeekbron>.

contact is allowed, it is spatially confined. Stepping off the trail and walking too close to the water's edge becomes a transgression. In certain areas, even proximity itself is forbidden. And if one fails to respect the rules, surveillance cameras register deviations, relay them to authorities, and translate the disturbance into a penalty. Three hundred fifty euros for getting too close to Nature, for sensing too much [fig. 3].



Figure 3 An information panel at Lommelse Sahara, claiming that entering water might be life-threatening. 2025. Lommel, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

The vignettes that follow unfold across three sites, each marked by a distinct sensory regime experimented through hydrosensory autoethnography. While all senses are inevitably interconnected (Pink 2015), certain ones dominate the sensory experience. At Paalse Plas, I primarily attend to sound: how anthropogenic noise from the numerous recreational activities drowns out the lake's own silent presence. At Lommelse Sahara – a landscape of dunes, conifer forests, and an inaccessible lake – tactility comes to the fore, nurturing a feeling of desire sparked by the impossibility of interacting with water. In the Kikbeek Valley, I focus on vision and distance, tracing how water is visible yet unreachable amid ongoing restoration works on the site. By experiencing this through my own body, I understand how the anthropogenic waters are governed through the senses. And even if formally prohibited, I practice intimacy through the senses available to me, exploring ways to foster belonging from the edge.

5.1 Paalse Plas

I arrived at Paalse Plas on a warm summer day in late August. It was my first site visit, and I was curious to see what kinds of sensory interactions might emerge. I began my walk near a small bicycle café by the lake, where I encountered my first point of contact with the site: a seven-page document listing prohibited activities [fig. 4]. Among them were instructions to “remain at least 10 meters from the shore”, and to “enter the water and go ashore only in the surfing and/or sailing club’s water sports zone. All other areas are prohibited except in emergency situations”.⁴

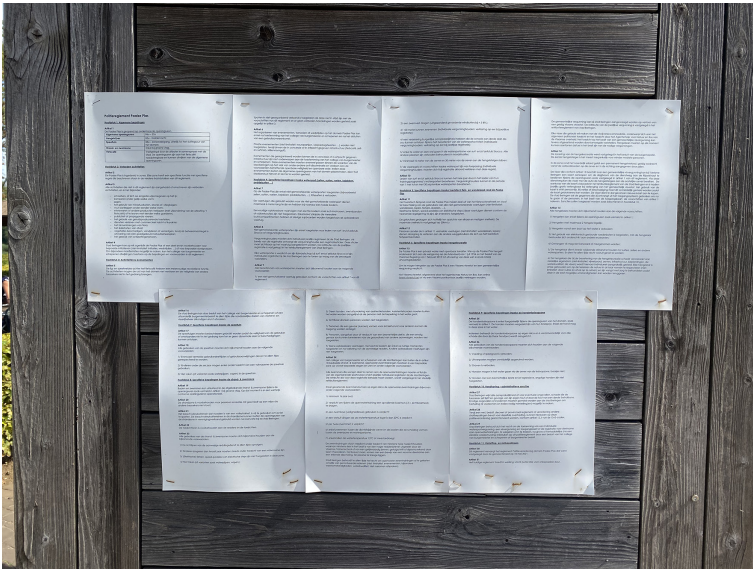


Figure 4 List of rules at the entrance of the Paalse Plas site. 2025. Beringen, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

Behind the café, there is a small beach – the only area where bathing is permitted. According to the rules, open-water swimming elsewhere is allowed exclusively on special occasions, for members of registered sports clubs or individuals officially authorised by the city of Beringen. The document contains many more conditions regulating interaction with water, which I will not list here. Their accumulation was already sufficient to mark the tone of the encounter.

⁴ Visit Beringen (s.d.). “Paalse Plas”. <https://www.visitberingen.be/paalseplas>.

Paalse Plas is described in the same document as a “private waterway with a public character”. In the 1960s, the pit was created as part of the Tessenderlo-Paal industrial site; the extracted sand was used, among other purposes, for the construction of the nearby highway. When extraction ceased, the pit gradually filled with water and remained largely undisturbed for years (Vandebosch 2014). Today, the forty-hectare lake is framed by a golf club, manicured lawns, a seasonal bathing area, a volleyball court, and a playground [figs 5-6]. This was the landscape I encountered – arriving with the naïve expectation of pristine Nature, only to find myself within a carefully produced, human-made environment.



Figures 5-6 Volleyball court (on the left) and a golf course (on the right). 2025. Beringen, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

I followed the shoreline, unaware that I was trespassing on the private golf course. A few instances later, a man in a golf cart approached me, saying that “it’s dangerous” to walk here because I could “get hit by a golf ball”. Accompanied by him to an asphalted road, I was instructed to continue my walk here, now ‘in order’. It was then that I became aware of how limited my movement was – how my body was immediately redirected away from the water. I could no longer feel the presence of the lake, overtaken instead by the shifted soundscape: people chatting, bicycles passing by, the motors of the electric golf carts humming, and, further along, the constant noise of the nearby highway, which grew impossible to ignore. At moments, I tried to listen to Nature, forcing myself to catch the crickets song in the grass, but these sounds were fragile, easily overtaken by human activity.

Despite having walked around the lake for hours, I had barely gotten in contact with it, and my attention slowly drifted away from the water. Most of my sensory engagement had been with the anthropogenic ecologies rather than with the lake itself. I noted in my recordings: “It’s just so unpleasant to walk next to the road while acknowledging that this place is only possible because of the

road". When I finally completed the round and returned to the small beach, I hoped that this relationship might change – that I could at last become intimate with the water. Yet the area was packed with people who, like me, had come to cool off on this warm day [figs 7-8].



Figures 7-8 View of the lake and the beach area from afar (on the left) and the designated swimming area (on the right). 2025. Beringen, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

Even the moment of immersion was carefully supervised by several lifeguards. Despite this, I entered the cold water, crowded with bodies and noise. I could feel the sandy bottom beneath my feet, the sharpness of mussels, the softness of algae against my skin. Floating on my back, I placed my head under the water, and it felt like relief. All surface sounds disappeared, replaced by a deep hum of the lake. In this brief silence, the waters allowed me to relax. It was then that I felt a moment of connection, despite the overwhelming human soundscape above.

5.2 Lommelse Sahara

It was late November, and after a long train and bus ride, I arrived at Lommelse Sahara [fig. 9]. The bare, almost surreal landscape of this site emerged from intense sand extraction and industrial pollution in the early twentieth century. In 1900, more than 300 hectares of heathland were sold to establish a zinc and sulfuric acid factory; emissions of heavy metals soon caused the vegetation to disappear. In the decades that followed, pollution, wind, and sand transformed the area into a sand plain – today celebrated as “one of the most beautiful spots in the Lage Kempen!”⁵ Its extractive past is largely folded into a dominant narrative of ecological recovery and protection.

5 Visit Lommel (s.d.). “Sahara”. <https://www.visitlommel.be/zien-en-doen/natuur/sahara>.



Figure 9 Signage for Lommelse Sahara. 2025. Lommel, Belgium.
© Kseniia Obukhova

The journey toward the dunes and the lake began in the forest [fig. 10]. Conifer trees are among the few that thrive in this sandy soil, many of them planted in the years following the end of industrial activity to stabilise the terrain and prevent further sand drift. As I left the forest and stepped onto the open sand, this layered history faded into the background of my awareness, replaced by the immediacy of the ground beneath my feet [fig. 11]. The surface was soft, still damp from recent rain, yielding with each step. The walk felt very tactile, unlike the rigid, asphalted paths I had followed at Paalse Plas. The softness of the ground slowed my pace and made me feel more present, more attuned to the landscape around me.



Figures 10-11 Conifer forest (on the left) and the Sahara's sandy ground (on the right). 2025. Lommel, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

This meditative experience of sensing Nature was interrupted by a series of unexpected constructions along the path [fig. 12]. I learned that this area had once served as a site for ammunition testing and detonation. “It’s not exactly what you would expect in a place like this”, I noted. The abandoned structures, though long unused, continued to interfere with my sense of connection. As I passed them, I imagined the sounds that once filled this space, the smells that once filled the air. Once again, the sensations that surfaced were anthropogenic, foreign to the calm I had begun to feel, yet impossible to separate from the ground on which I walked.



Figure 12 The demolition pit, where various explosives were tested and detonated (from the information panel on the site). 2025. Lommel, Belgium.
© Kseniia Obukhova

After a while, the lake came into view. I approached it slowly, noting each prohibition sign that forbade not only swimming but any contact with water, explaining this restriction with the presence of cyanobacteria [fig. 13]. I sat down on the sand and watched the lake for several minutes. In that moment, I recorded: “The only thing you want to do is to take off your shoes and place your feet in the water. Or, at the least, touch it with your hand”. When contact with water was prohibited, my hands instinctively turned toward the ground. Fingers pressed into the sand, lifted it, let it fall again. This tactile engagement felt almost compensatory – as if the need to feel through touch sought another surface to complete the gesture. And somehow, it felt like the lake could be sensed through the humid sand soaked with its waters.



Figure 13 Sign prohibiting swimming and interacting with water in front of the main lake. 2025. Lommel, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

5.3 Kikbeekbron

It was a sunny winter day in January. Because the site was difficult to reach by public transport, I rode my bike from the train station in Genk to the Kikbeek Valley. The valley surrounding the Kikbeekbron lies within the Hoge Kempen National Park, near Maasmechelen. Like other landscapes in the region, it was once an extensive heathland. The sand mining ceased entirely at the beginning of the new millennium. Gradually, springwater filled the former quarry, forming the Kikbeek lake, while the steep sand walls were reshaped as part of an ongoing effort to restore the area as a nature reserve.

At the time of my visit, the valley was officially inaccessible on foot due to restoration works under the Flemish Blue Deal project, which aims to reestablish the valley's original ecosystem and increase its water retention capacity (ANB 2024). Although these works were expected to be completed by the end of 2025, my attempts to obtain information from the park administration remained unanswered.⁶ In

6 While finalising the paper, an official announcement by the ANB has been published, stating that the Valley remained closed to recreational visitors due to a landslide on one of the quarry walls. The administration specified that the landslide has not been caused by the restoration works. <https://anb.prezly.com/vallei-van-de-kikbeekbron-blijft-afgesloten-voor-recreatie-na-grondverschuiving>.

the absence of clarity, I decided to go anyway – to approach, if not fully enter, my last waterbody for now.

It took me about one and a half hours to reach the park by bike. Cycling alongside the road for much of the way made me think again about how sand extraction had enabled the construction of the very infrastructures I was now moving through. Even when I approached the valley, I could still hear the road clearly. Like at Paalse Plas, this sound traveled across the landscape, reminding me of how these anthropogenic waters are inseparable from what once gave them life.



Figure 14 Former entrance to the site, currently blocked due to the restoration works. 2026. Maasmechelen, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

When I finally reached the point where access to the valley itself might have been possible, I was stopped: the entrance was closed. Signs announced ongoing works and warned of potential dangers from machinery [fig. 14]. I already knew that the area was officially inaccessible, but standing there, with my own body barred from entering, made the closure feel more real than I anticipated. I continued cycling along the panoramic route that circled the valley at a distance. From there, I could finally see the Kikbeekbron from above [fig. 15]. Parts of the landscape bore visible traces of recent intervention, yet no workers or machines were in sight. The lake itself was visible only from afar. From this perspective, sensing became almost entirely visual. I tried to imagine what it might feel like to stand closer, to listen to the water and its ecologies as I had attempted at Paalse Plas, or to feel the damp ground near its edge, as at Lommelse Sahara. And even if access was prohibited at every

gate I found along the way, with as much as an electric wire keeping trespassers out, I remained in relation through sight. Observing Kikbeekbron from a distance became a way of staying with the waterbody rather than turning away from it.



Figure 15 Kikbeek Valley seen from a panoramic cycling road. 2026. Maasmechelen, Belgium. © Kseniia Obukhova

6 Discussion: Sensing from the Edge

It might seem that the encounters described in these vignettes are failures, incomplete forms of relation: I was redirected from water, even blocked by an electric fence from getting close to its edge. I was threatened with a fine if I touched its surface. I cycled for hours just to see a glimpse of a lake from afar. Getting intimate with anthropogenic waters is a challenge. And yet, as discussed earlier in this paper, intimacy with waters does not always require physical proximity.

At Paalse Plas, intimacy was shaped primarily through sound. The site was dominated by anthropogenic noise coming mostly from loud recreational activities and traffic. Amidst its intensity, the lake itself remained silent, almost obedient. Here, sensing water required effort, and I found myself constantly forcing my attention despite the distracting, controlling human presence. Yet, the moment I let go of this sensing exercise, the moment I allowed my body to release into the cold waters of the lake, a connection suddenly emerged. It was

subtle – accompanied by a deep hum of the water – nothing like what I expected.

Lommelse Sahara offered a different form of intimacy. Here, connection unfolded through denial, producing a condition in which a desire for touch became the dominant affective mode of relation. Although the landscape is visibly haunted by its extractive past, it allowed me to engage my senses almost immediately, particularly through the tactility of the ground. Unlike at Paalse Plas, I was not forcefully redirected or instructed on how close was too close. This illusion of openness of interaction and somewhat freedom of movement made the encounter at the water's edge more unsettling, as if my body had already been invited into relation with the landscape, only to be stopped at the threshold. For a moment, watching without interacting further reinforced the separateness between me and this waterbody. But suddenly, with a small, almost intuitive gesture of pressing my hand into the humid sand, I enacted another subtle yet powerful resistance to this limitation.

The Kikbeek Valley marked the culmination of this hydrosensory endeavour. Here, the restoration of the original ecosystem of the landscape once again depended on significant transformations led by human intervention and machinery. The resulting restrictions were harsh, raising a sense of danger associated with these anthropogenic sites. In the name of safety, any form of access to the valley was denied, as well as most forms of sensorial engagement. This is when I attuned to the only sense that remained available to me: sight. If I am being honest, I was not expecting to see the lake at all, and was genuinely surprised when it appeared from the saddle of my bike, even at a distance. I noticed the traces of machine work in the pressed sand, the irregular, shapeless patches of water that did not fit the original banks, and carefully designed sand pyramids that served as barriers. Observing the valley undergoing yet another human-led change helped me establish a temporary connection with Kikbeekbron.

These failures to sense are forms of 'otherwise knowing', definitely strange and unexpected, but integral to hydrosensory autoethnography. At Lommelse Sahara, for example, the prohibition on contact with water was reasoned by the proliferation of cyanobacteria in the lake – a MTH actor whose abundance made the water unsafe for human bodies. I could only respect remaining at the edge. Such failures (or conscious practices of estrangement) actually help read on whose terms belonging happens: on the terms of MTH or of the institutions that act on their behalf? At Lommelse Sahara, the answer felt closer to the former. At Paalse Plas, to the latter. At Kikbeekbron, it was somewhere in between.

I have to admit that promises to meet places where “nature is in control” complicated my relationship with these sites and set a certain

tone to these encounters. First, I did not fully trust them, knowing the history of the sites. Second, these ‘proxy stories’, (Neimanis 2017), as well as my upbringing in urban European environments, shaped an understanding of Nature as something ‘wild’ – an inherited conviction I immediately faced and still have to unlearn. At Paalse Plas, I remember consciously trying to ‘listen to’ Nature. And I failed. This failure raised an honest question: what had I been expecting Nature to sound like, and where did this expectation come from? If I were to return to these sites, I would not obsessively look for Nature, but stay with these small, attentive intimacies that were revealed to me in the thresholds that I temporarily occupied. I would open myself to what is already there, realising that this is already a form of belonging offered to me.

At the same time, sensing from the edge made the consequences of dry, detached governance easy to notice. The burden of attunement should not fall on those subject to governance (individuals, visitors, researchers, waters), who are left to find intimacy in the fractures. The question I have not yet found an answer to is what would happen if governance let itself be estranged by the waters, what if it got ‘wet’? In the first place, it would mean admitting the limits of what one should know. Hydrosensory autoethnography, as a situated, ethical, and intimate practice, might help challenge the mastery, become a student again (Tarkhanian 2025). However, these same characteristics hardly align with the bureaucratic traditions discussed earlier and might be a source of friction (Tsing 2005). Whether these frictions can be held within governance is where I see the next direction of this research.

7 Conclusion: Possibilities of Belonging to Anthropogenic Waters

In a search for my waterbody, I found three, and none of them would I dare call mine. The very gesture of claiming a waterbody – of ‘mining’ it, in both senses of the word – is extractive in the same logic that gave origin to the waterbodies I encountered. It originates in the conviction that Nature is something that can be owned. Could it be, instead, that I belong to all three, and to many more that I am yet to meet? Belonging, again, as practised bodily, through attentiveness and ethical relation with the MTH, with waters that might withhold themselves. Belonging, for as much as possible, on their terms.

This paper proposed hydrosensory autoethnography as one way of practising such relations under conditions of institutional constraint. By using my own experience as a site of inquiry, this method makes legible how intimacy and belonging are governed in the Anthropocene. The three encounters I described are partial and

unfinished; they do not resolve the question of what belonging to anthropogenic waters might mean. Instead, they open a space for doubting our current relationships with these waters. We can keep exploring intimacies at the water's edge, on the thresholds we often cannot cross. However, the real potential of this method lies in what it might offer to those who currently govern these waters from a chosen distance. Intimate governance is not yet a practice, but it could become one.

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