

# Eco-Healing: Curative Agency and The Blue Space

**JANA KOPELANT REHAK, Ph.D.**

Anthropology Department, University of Maryland  
1111 Woods Hall, 4302 Chapel Lane, College Park, MD 20742  
e-mail: jkopelen@umd.edu

## ABSTRACT:

*This paper examines human health in the context of socioecological systems. Considering a holistic healing model, this study explores how local self-curative practices are shaped by sensory experiencing and believes in the curative “magical” agency of blue space. Zooming on an aqua landscape, in a small town in the Czech Republic, discusses healing properties people assign to the aquatic landscape and argue that by engaging with the Otava River swimmers are constructing an eco-healing holistic model.*

## KEYWORDS:

eco-healing, water, socio-ecology, magic, agency, aqua scape

This paper is an invitation to think about human health in the context of socio-ecological systems. I examine peoples’ perceptions of the curative properties of water. I focus on a place called Fuferna, a riverside area, by the old mill, adopted historically by swimmers, in the town of Susice in the southwest Czech Republic. In my analysis, I discuss how outdoor swimming affects people, through their engagements with the Otava River. I argue, that by using a natural environment, these swimmers in Otava are constructing an eco-healing holistic model.<sup>1</sup>

Building on my fieldwork conducted over two summers, 2018 and 2019, I connect my research to related concepts about eco-healing and therapeutic aqua landscapes, as these are explored in the publication, *Blue Space, Health and Wellbeing* (Foley, Kerns, Kistemann and Wheler 2019). Defining waterscape as a curative blue space, these scholars show a site of health-related practices based on a holistic multisensory healing model. Seashores, riversides, and lakes are blue spaces where people seek restoration of their wellbeing. Considering a holistic healing model, this study examines how local self-curative practices are shaped by sensory experiencing and beliefs in the curative “magical” agency of blue space. I take Gregory Bateson’s theoretical approach to ecology (Bateson 1972) to further explore physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of holistic eco-healing. In the worldwide context of current re-evaluations of human belonging to a larger ecological system, as it is triggered by the current

environmental crisis, a holistic view of human health is a particularly important subject.

As I write this essay, I hold on the memories from my childhood and I identify with the swimmers’ narratives, as they reflect on the physical sensations and emotional impact of swimming in the river. Daily swimming in the river is, for me, part of being back home, when returning to my home town, Susice, during the summers over the last twenty years. Swimming in the cold river is a restorative experience for me, as it is for the swimmers I have had the opportunity to talk to. In addition to my anthropological work focused on people’s interactions with their natural environments, my personal encounters with the natural world support my understanding of other’ engagements with the place. I take joy from the cold touch of the water when it cuts sharply into my skin. I inhale the aroma of the river when observing how the colors and light intermingle between the surface and bottom of the river. When I listen to the sounds of the water [any water in a natural environment] the aquatic soundscape enters my body and becomes part of my remembering. I photograph images hidden in the water, flickering on the surface of the water, before they drop to the bottom of the river. I draw the colors, hidden in the spectrum of the light traveling with the flow of the river. For me stepping in the river, brings the motion of the water in its soft cold touch, and awakening feeling the movement brings awareness to my body through sensory experiencing.

<sup>1</sup> All current photographs of the swimmers in the text are made by Jana Kopelant Rehak in the summer of 2018 and 2019. Thank you to the Museum City of Susice, for letting me use historical photographs. I would like to thank all participants in this study for sharing their ideas and feelings with me, and for the inspiration they give me to write about the agency of the Otava river. Thank you Alexander Routlach for his reading and comments on my first draft. I am grateful to Geoff Burkhard for his helpful comments. I would like to thank Ruth Toulson for her strong believe in my work and her kind dedication to read and challenge me with comments and questions in the proces of writing this article.

Being part of the movement, sound, and light of the river is a participatory act which activates a sensory awareness. It is a moment of a mindful inhabiting of the organic world, as explored by Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1972) and later discussed by Tim Ingold as “being alive” (Ingold 2011: 73). Ingold suggested in his extensive discussion of the relationship between indigenous, imaginative, animistic approaches, and a scientific perspective of the inhabited space between “earth and sky,” that for science to recognize the imaginative epistemology, the so-called western tradition of thought must depend not only on observation but open up to participation. Informed by Bateson and Ingold’s ecological approach, doing ethnography in the “wild blue space” of the Otava river, is for me an act of joining in the movement of the river, rather than describing the “objectified forms” (Ingold 2011: 21).

Considering some of the emerging perspectives on experimental anthropological writing, as it is evident for example from the publications *Anthropologies and Futures* (Salazar, Pink, Irving et al. 2017) and *Crumpled Paper Boat* (Pandian and McLean 2017). I craft this essay in an effort to expand beyond some of the challenges of the experimental movement in the 1980s (Marcus and Fisher 1999). Experimenting with a concept of healing through “sensory knowledge” (Stoller 1986), I write this essay in the mode of autoethnography. Experimenting in ethnographic writing, as Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean pointed out, allows us [anthropologists] to share a promise with more literary modes like fiction, poetry, cinema, and other expressive arts. I agree with Pandian and McLean, that the volume of experimental anthropology writing is, in its transitive potential, a process of communication and a form of material practice, which is as participatory and dynamic as ethnographic fieldwork.

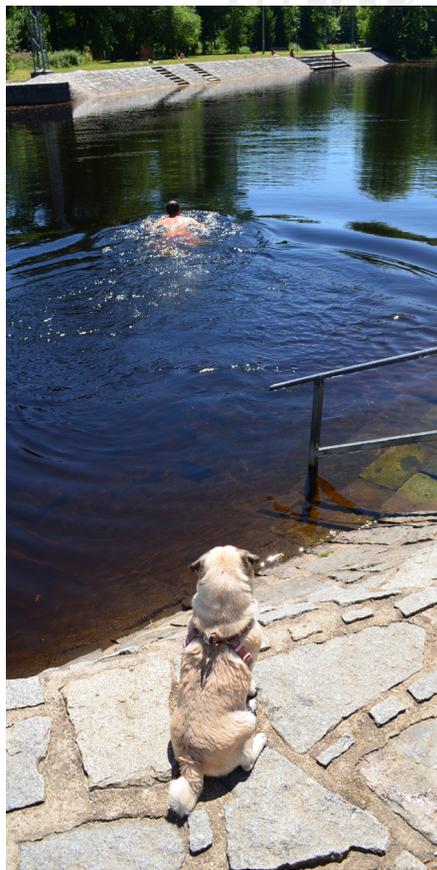
### THE RIVER PERFORMS MAGIC

The Otava river was dark black-blue and covered with yellow linden tree blossoms when I came for my morning swim on an unusually warm June morning in 2019. The morning wind was moving a veil of linden blossoms collected from trees on the river banks slowly down the stream just before entering Susice. I sat down on the wooden beam of an old river dam, put my feet in the water and I watched the quiet movement of the river. The river was still chilly from the previous night, coming from the Sumava Mountains. As I swam against the stream, my moving arms ruptured the linden floral pattern on the water. The earthy rich aroma of the water awakened

my sensory memory of the river. Surrendering to the river, I let a flow of water carry my body with the linden flowers down the stream. I was part of the river. Experiencing water was deeply satisfying. Contentment from being a part of the river gave me a sense of being alive.

“The river is performing magic”, shouted my friend Monika from the riverbank, before she dove into the water. On the other side of the river, Monika’s friend Monan also came for her morning swim. “It’s fantastic to be able to come here first thing in the morning and throw your body into the river, it’s magical,” she said. I was drying off after my swim in the morning sun and watching both Monika’s swimming against the stream and then letting their bodies float with the current of the river.

As I watch them engaging with the Otava river, I was asking myself: How is the magic of the river realized by Monika, and possibly other swimmers I have seen engaging with the river? Could this be an experience of what Marcel Mauss called “a concrete magic?” If the river holds the energy of magical powers and if techniques of magic are like “seeds which bore the fruit of the soil of magic,” (1972: 142) as Mauss wrote, then would the swimmer get to participate in techniques of magical performance? Considering the ideas that imaginative magic is embodied in the agency of the river, echo in Monika’s and Monan’s voices, provoked my interest in the further investigation



Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

of the underlying reasons for theirs, and many others, regular engagement with the Otava River.

Early anthropological studies of magic, namely Edward B. Tylor and James Frazer, were developed in the context of the theory of cultural evolution. Magic was discussed as an early form of “primitive” religion. It was later, in the first part of the twentieth century, when scholarship shifted from the intellectual origins of magic, towards the social and psychological role of magical practices, as evidenced by the works of Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski. It was the work of Evans-Pritchard which significantly changed the direction in theories of magic, by his symbolic interpretative analysis, based on his extensive studies of African religion. This is evident in iconic works of the symbolic anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz’s analysis, discussions expanding anthropological understandings of religion even further away from the frameworks concerned with categorizations inclined towards experiential interpretations.

“Magic is the sensory experience of interrelatedness that emerges with individuals developed a unique intimacy with natural and social environments” (Glucklich 1997: 235), wrote Ariel Glucklich. Similarly, Susan Greenwood conceptualized magic as the perception of the relationship of environment and religion, what she discussed as a “magical consciousness” (2005: 4). By referring to a magical consciousness, Greenwood emphasizes the notion of consciousness as a stream of possibilities overcoming the Cartesian dualism of mind and nature, representing the inclusion of the body and other beings in nature, and further as “an intrinsic quality of a wider universe” (1997: 6). Magic then, according to Greenwood, is not a category of things, but rather an experienced magical state of mind, a human ability to imagine and to use this knowledge about how emotions and concentration may change consciousness. In Greenwood’s thesis, magic is not only a property of human thought but also action, which cannot be separated from the social and environmental context, “it is a way of thinking” (1997: 7) she conceptualized as a “magical consciousness” (Greenwood 1997: 90); which cancels dualistic notions shaped the Western perceptions of nature and mind.

Greenwood and Glucklich’s discussion of magic, derives from holistic thinking about the human experience as it is embodied in a larger ecological universe, as extensively discussed by Gregory Bateson and more recently by Tim Ingold. What connects this scholarship to my

work is the integrative approach to emotions, body, spirituality, and the environment. Swimming in the Otava is a form of non-verbal engagement with the river that is intimately concerned with healing in contact with the anima beyond the human sphere.

### THE CURATIVE AGENCY OF THE RIVER

“This summer was magical, I went for a swim several times every day,” said Monika. She meets her friend Monan at the Otava river every day for their swim, during their summer vacations in Susice, as they take a break from teaching in larger cities. When Monika was saying goodbye to me, at the end of that summer, she promised to write more to me about the meanings the Otava River holds for her. In Fall 2018 she wrote to me: “When I was a little girl, I used to go swim to the Otava River. My grandmother told me: Don’t go to the swimming pool, go to the river, because the river wins. And I, as a little girl, would just laugh about it. I could not understand it at all. This past summer, I was running into so many people by the river which I knew from my childhood. Many of them would talk to me about how the river is enchanted. When coming to the river at 8 a.m. in the morning, when the river is just 14 C, one could see how swimming can be amazing. In the river, a person thinks positively, feels good, and forgets about all problems.”

When reading her letter, I identify with her life-long engagement with the Otava River. Being in the river, swimming and playing is part of my profound childhood memories. I remember the different aromas of the river plants

and the taste of foods like peaches and tomatoes which my mother brought with us. My father came to the river at 5 p.m., directly from his work. He first took a short swim and then would play with us. Sometimes he would chat with a small group of old-timers, the swimmers gathering in the Fuferna area. My family would stay till 6 o’clock and then walk home for dinner. I was always pleasantly tired walking home with my family from the river. On the hot summer days, the streets were still warm at the end the day, just before sunset. Endless hours of play in the water, when we [my family] built little lakes for small fish we caught. I also remember watching clouds create images in the sky, while drying our bodies after swimming. These are my pleasant childhood memories which shaped, in profound ways, how I engage with the Otava River today.

Reading Monika’s letter reminded me of a conversation with her friend Monan, during which she told me about how, they, often just sat by the river silently without a need to talk. She spoke about how just gazing into the river will bring a “change” upon them. Turning to my fieldnotes, I came across a related record of our [Monan and me] conversation when sitting by the river. Monan described her engagement with the river: “I step into the river, and then, later I come out as a new person. I don’t have any pain in my body. I have to immerse my whole body, including my head, because the river is pulling me in. Then, I look inside the river and I see golden color. The river is full of gold. In the spring, I can’t hold myself back. I take my clothes off and jump in. I turn red after, but it is wonderful. Sometimes, I just stretch my arms and legs and I feel like

I can reach the sea. I would like to be spread (her dust after death) into the Otava. In that way, my body will come to the sea and connect with my husband Paja. Paja found himself in this river as well. First, he was slow to get into the water, but now he loves it.”

Monan, just like her friend Monika, acknowledged in her narratives the river’s agency, when she said, the river is pulling her in. (It is important to know that the river water is typically very cold and so immersing the full-body, including the head, in the cold river is extra challenging). Monika and Monan both spoke about how their engagement with the Otava river is transformative in terms of their body, physically and emotionally. For Monan, swimming in the river is a restorative ritual, constituted in presence, but also imagined time and space with her husband (between the river and ocean) in their afterlife.

While Monan and her husband Paja, “found” the river’s magic in their adult life, Monika, like me, and some other swimmers, experienced the river’s enchantment from early childhood. For Monika, remembering her times by the river from her childhood, through her imaginative process, brings together the grandmother’s belief in the river’s magic and her aquatic sensory knowledge. It is now, in her adulthood, that she is expanding her understanding of the river’s agency, her grandmother spoke to her about. As she developed knowledge of the river over her life course, Monika is now very aware of the river’s nurturing agency. The curative techniques are generated magically by the river, and in relation to swimming, a ritualized structure in Monika and Monan summer days shows how they construct their health through their sensory knowledge. I agree with Glücklich, that the magical experience depends on both the awareness of „interconnectedness and an actual intimacy with an ecology“ (Glücklich 1997: 124).

For Monika, and her grandmother, the river is an active agent, giving positive thoughts evoking good feelings, and helping her let go of all the problems in her life. The river, as imagined agent, supports a general well being in the world. Endowed with agency, the river is a domain where Monika experiences the relationship between imaginary agency and concrete materiality, things not mutually exclusive Ingold articulates (2011).

Monan on the other hand, describes her being in the river in terms of a healing process. From when she enters the river, immersing herself in the cold water, and then is pulled to the bottom of the river, she is embracing ways in which this journey is affecting her body and imagination. When stepping out of the river, Monan, just like Monika recognizes a *change*



Fuferna. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

in her feelings about her body in the world. For both, being in the water is like a journey, in Victor Turner's sense, *between and betwixt* (1969), the ritualized process during which an individual is transformed. Monika's sensory experiencing swimming in the river daily, resembles a healing ritual. In their view, they are healed from the pain, through the haptic, the scopic and mental process, within a *blue space*. In this light, the Otava River is for Monika's a temporal [liminal] space, enabling a change, transformation experienced through sensory knowledge. Healing magical rites, as Glucklich suggested, restore the wholeness the sense of the systematic completeness in the consciousness of the swimmer (Glucklich 1997: 96).

### HEALING AND BLUE SPACE

In Susice, Fuferna is a place where the river leaves the city park and approaches the first houses in town. It is a landscape by the river banks, developed by the city to support the swimmers' easy access to the river. The accumulation of the water above the dams provides a deeper area, an ideal place for swimmers. The river's flow is divided by a small dam into three separate streams, where water, falling over the wooden beam, makes a sound that is characteristic of this place. It is a social place, where multiple generations mingle while engaging with the Otava river. Nearby is a park with an area for climbing, playgrounds, an outdoor restaurant also offering concerts, outdoor movies and festivals. The walkway along the river is part of a park which is popular across generations for people with their dogs, mothers with children pushing strollers, or packs of teenagers. Benches by the river are frequently occupied by elderly people talking or gazing at the river. The river is "the heart", "the gift" or "the jewelry" of this city, they say in Susice. Conversations with Monika and Monan left me with further broader questions about eco-healing and the therapeutic potential of water and aquatic environments.

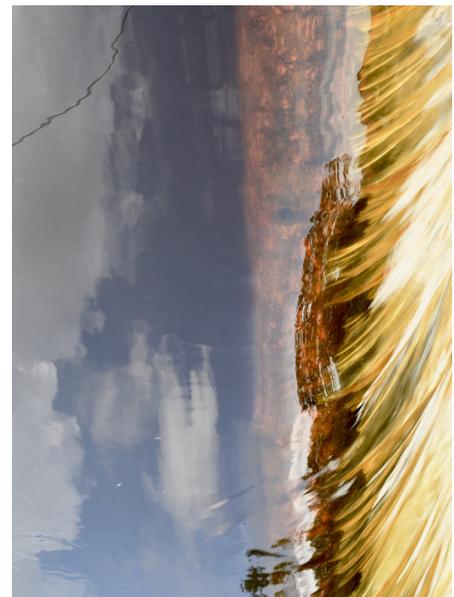
I was standing on the river steps, getting ready for my swim, when two strangers walked by and I overheard one of them saying to the other "the Susice spa" [lazne Susice]. The river banks in Fuferna attracted people of all generations on hot weekend days in the summer of 2019. People swam in the river, rested on their blankets and children played with stones on a small island in between the river banks. As Czechs do not have a great tolerance for heat, river dwellers consider themselves especially lucky to have access to cold water on such days.

This brief comment of two strangers walking by, brought a flashback to the photographs

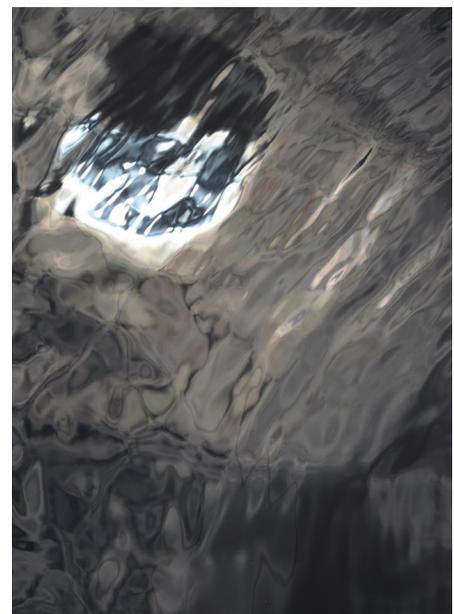
I have seen in old albums belonging to my family and friends, depicting our ancestors in the "Fuferna natural river spa" in the first part of the 20th century. Photographs of the river and swimmers are more than family frames focusing on particular kin members in swimsuits by the river. These are historical photographs, showing a communal social life in a developed landscape and architecture by the city, supporting people's engagements with the river in Susice's blue space. The photographs of Fuferna nature spa depict the wooden cabins, in a garden-style building, and a small food-stand with outdoor tables. The photographs from my family albums made me aware of the history of a swimming tradition in my family and Susice.

Seeing similar photographs in my friend's family albums, led me to further research the history of "the natural river spa" called Fuferna, in the archive of the Museum of the City Susice. In the museum archive, I read a document about public swimming in the river, popular not only during my grandparent's time in the 1930s, but in the 19th century. The river spa was preceded by older steam baths in the 19th century, but the spa practice has existed since the 15th century, according to the local archival records.

The local popular public bath-style spas, indoors or outdoors, functioned in many cities in Czechoslovakia and were closed during the 1940–50s. One of the documents from 1574 is quoting prices for services in the Susice spa, with an emphasis on how accessible local spas were for people of different economic backgrounds. Because bathing in a spa was generally considered a matter of health, as well as an entertaining type of activity, the spa was managed by a type of doctor called *lazebnik*. In addition to haircutting and shaving services, the spa in Susice offered massage and the medical practice of bloodletting, as well as food and drink afterward. A visit to the spa was also a form of social engagement with others from the community and a way to obtain news in towns. In addition to hot water baths, people sat on the wooden stools in the hot steam room, and a 'doctor' would scratch their bodies with oak tree branches. Washing of one's hair with aromatic spiced or herbal water was optional. The hot steam in the room was maintained by the doctor who dropped hot stones, bricks, or metals into the water. Space was divided into two rooms, one for just sitting and the other for cutting hair, shaving, and various surgical works. A 19th-century document describes how the public spa continued to serve the community in Susice. The steam and bath spa in the hotel "V Raji" (In Paradise), was replaced in 1849 by a spa opened inside the match-making factory,



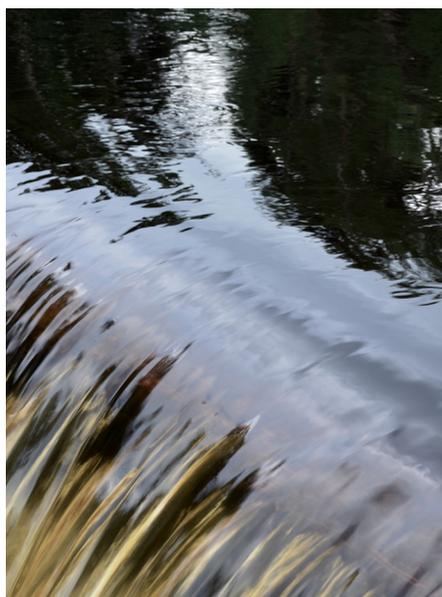
Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.



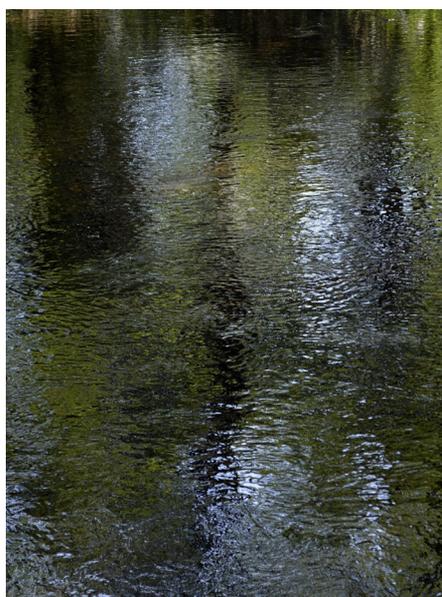
Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.



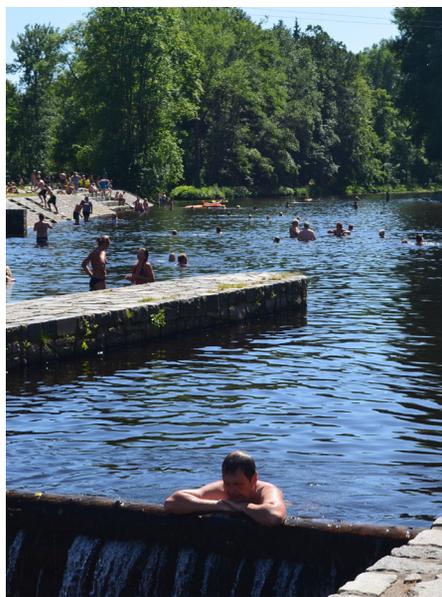
Monan. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.



Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.



Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.



Fuferna. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

founded by Vojtech Scheinosta. The factory's spa had two separate entrances, one for factory workers directly from the factory, and the other from the north side for the general public, next to the hotel V Raji.

The popularity of river swimming in the Otava in Susice in the middle of the 19th century is reflected in a newly established law by the city council, based on the citizen's complaints about the immoral activities of youth when swimming in different places in the river. This law stated that men and boys can only swim during the summer months at the designated areas by the upper dam by the Kotroch mill. All animals could only enter the river below the city, and then women could only swim in a parallel shoulder to the river, called Rousarka. Rousarka was designated for the women, bathing typically in undergarments or gowns at dusk and on weekends. The law emphasized that any person violating this law will be legally punished. Since the end of the 19th century, multiple proposals were presented to the city by different entrepreneurs to develop a public river spa. It was not until 8th July 1907, when the plan for the river spa was materialized by the city council and opened to the public. The original river spa had seven cabins, three for men and four for women, one for the keeper, and one locker room for men. The inventory included: four towels, four swimsuits, four drying clothes, one thermometer. In each cabin were steps to the river, one table, a wooden hanger, a mirror, and one wooden bench. The inventory for women's cabins was the same.

Institutionalized water spas were historically part of mainstream medicinal practice in Czech, and until today patients with terminal illnesses or after major medical surgery are eligible for a spa residency. Patients' placement in a sanatorium, which includes a water spa, is based on a referral from a primary doctor. Typically a 30 day stay in a spa is covered by state health insurance. Spas such as Charles Bad, Marian Bad, Janky Bad, Jachymovite Bad were established based on the location of the natural hot water springs. When in the spa, patients sign up for the daily curative program according to their medical needs. The curative program for the residential spa is based on physical therapy, water therapy, a healthy diet, and relaxation (see Trnka 2018).

Evidence from the museum archive shows clearly how people in Susice historically engaged with water in cleansing and beautifying rituals, which originally took place in the indoor spa and later in outdoor designated places at the river Otava. While the main motivations for attending aqua rituals were driven by the cultural concepts of healthy living and beautification, organized bathing

and later swimming activity also became a social phenomenon during which people exchanged ideas, information and built social bonds.

In the next section, I draw from the multiple narratives of other swimmers, which I recorded in the Summer of 2019, and I further emphasize an individual's experiences based on a holistic model of health and wellness. I show how the swimmers, constructing their health through the engagement with the river, expressed in a symbolic language their concept of the curative agency of the river, something that some realized as a form of natural heritage.

### BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE SKY

I was slowly stepping into the river, when I realized an elderly woman standing next to me on the stone steps was watching me. She said with a slight smile at the corner of her lips: "You have to grow up with this river to like it." I smiled back, thinking about my life-long relationship with the river. "I can't imagine life without this river," said another woman approaching the steps. Both women agreed on how, in order to be happy, they don't need much more in life than this river. At that point, I was ready to swim and as I jumped into the river, an older man [a stranger to me] greeted me with words: I began to investigate further, systematically, how other swimmers benefit from their engagement with the river. I was interested to know, if for others, like for Monika's, the river holds healing transformative magical powers.

"Swimming in the river is a movement between earth and heaven. Being touched by the water is a grounding experience. I love this river, this river heals, because the water comes from mountains with healing elements (actual substances in the water)," as one woman put it. "This river is a gift. I swim and then sit and read here. It is charging me up in amassing ways", said one of the old-time swimmers. Independently one of the middle age men said, "The river takes away all troubles and worries. My wife likes it here, we come together for a swim, we sit next to each other and read. We have a good time here. This river is *life* for me, its healing power is in its current, which takes troubles away. I love the river that is ever-changing in its golden color, aroma, coldness, and movement. I absorb the river with all my senses."

As is evident from swimmers' voices above, being part of the movement of the river means participating in active self-healing. The act of stepping into the "clean and cold river from the mountains," is to imagine the material property of the river, purified by the natu-



Monan. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

ral [uncontaminated] substances [minerals and metals from the earth] on one hand, and the other hand also charged with the supernatural powers, like “the magic,” as many put it.

All participants in this study [the people I met and talked to] are actively engaged with the Otava River through the summer swimming season, but some swim also during spring and fall when the water is close to 0 C. In addition to some old-timers, I saw new families and individuals, new regulars. Generally, they come to swim and rest, as well as sometimes to socialize, talk, and joke. Generally, all participants in this study expressed how they register the restorative qualities of the swim in the Otava River. While some swimmers talked about their life-long engagement with the river and emphasized their childhood memories, others spoke about their sense of accomplishment they have from their commitment to swimming in cold water regularly in their adult life. But all my informants had profound clarity in their articulation when they talked about their engagements with the river.

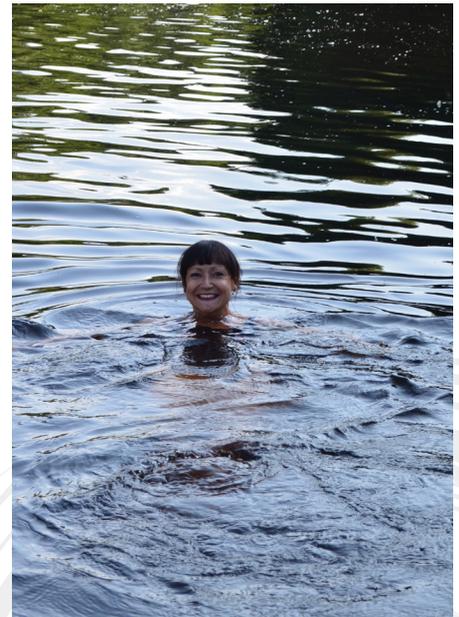
Ingold’s discussion addressing the relationship between science and animism is helpful here, for thinking about these expressed experiences swimmers have from their engagement with the river. Ingold, exploring philosophical questions regarding the dichotomy between materiality and imagination, in Bateson’s tradition, emphasizes the integrated relationships of all organisms within a larger ecosystem. To Ingold and Bateson, human participation in an inhabit ecosystem, in multiple pathways, is “the mesh work of life” (Ingold 2011: 70–73). Two points in Ingold’s work are particularly relevant to this study. First, his discussion of the experiential aspect of “being in the world,” in the sense of inhabiting the world, allows us to

think further in holistic ways about eco-healing approaches. Secondly, his emphasis on the primacy of movement in life, in a broad sense. Ingold suggests that the animistic world is in “perpetual flux,” and further argues that “once we recognize the movement in the animistic cosmos,” the inclusion of the animistic cosmos into scientific classification would become comprehensible to the scientific world (2011: 73). The swimmers connect their sensory and mental processes with a holistic approach to health and wellness.

A woman, who comes to the river regularly with her family, told me with affection in her voice: “I fell in love with the Otava River. The water comes clean from the mountains and the river connects people. For me swimming in the river is sort of *connecting* the earth and sky.”

Her expression about being in the blue space resonates with Ingold’s definition of the environment, in a broad sense, it is “the space in between earth and sky” (1995: 95).

Similarly, others spoke about the stress-relieving and cleansing qualities of the river’s movement. One of the younger women, who swims in the river the whole year, said: “For me, bodily contact with the cold river has a calming effect on the emotions and worries in our life. The cold water recharges me very quickly. It speeds my blood circulation and I forget all. Water takes all my troubles always with its flow.” A different swimmer described her motivations to swim: “Something was pulling me to try. For me it is psychological. First, the water was so cold, I couldn’t breathe and my throat closed up, but after some time it became a very powerful way for me to detach from all and I experienced an unbelievable change in my mood. At that time it worked for me like an anti-depressant. I imagine it is like being under hard drugs. It was euphoric



Swimmer in the Otava River. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

and enjoyable for some time. After a while, I added running along the water, after my run, I would jump into the river. The water was just 7 degrees C and it was fantastic. I also believe that the river is curative because it is moving water that comes directly from the mountains, which is different from swimming in a pond.”

From the narrative of this swimmer, it is evident that the experience in the river gives people multiple pleasant sensations, and as they believe, curative benefits. Karoline Doughty suggested that these different sensory inputs work together through a process known as ‘kinaesthesia,’ which refers to the awareness of the body’s position in space through the sense of movement felt in the muscle’s tendons and joints, and further refers to Paterson’s concept of synergetic conjunction or nexus of “visceral sensation and exterior perception” (Doughty 2019: 87, Parson 2009: 4).



Fuferna Spa. © The archive of the Museum of the City Susice.

An older woman swimmer, in her 80s, reflected: “It is in the beauty and the sound of the river, that I find calmness. Our golden river gives me the impulse for life and keeps me physically strong and moving. I don’t mind how cold or warm the water is, I swim anytime when the temperature is between 7C and 20C.” In a different casual conversation, one man said: “being touched by water is a grounding experience and when I swim I feel like the river hugs me”. For the swimmers, the Otava River is “engaging,” the invitation to be in a comfort zone. For some also, it provides a challenge to step out of their own comfort, as evident from another swimmer: “I started five years ago; one can do it at any age. Swimming in the river is an invitation to face my laziness. Challenge to step out of my comfort zone. I am only fighting myself. When it is a foggy day, or the wind is blowing hard, then it is hard to come to the river. Of course, I am motivated by the healthy aspects, which are generally known, but my main motivations are driven by experimenting with what is possible to do with my body and mainly with my psyche. I believe that hardening strengthens self-confidence. If one believes that cold water will profit him and he will not get sick, nothing bad will happen. Otava is for my concern of heart, I grew up by the river, its clarity and beauty are fantastic. I believe in the river’s healing properties, not only thanks to peat. I think that the river has healing energy, independent from its chemical composition, even impossible to prove it scientifically. Strengthening of the organism, as I believe, travels through the energetic base, and so it strengthens physical and mental capacities.”

It is evident from multiple narratives, that swimmers developed a particular knowledge about the blue space of the Otava, shaped by their sensory, ecological and spiritual experiences. While many expressed their knowledge of the curative substances and purity in the very materiality of the water and aqua-healing through the sensory, they spoke at greater length about the spiritual curative agency of the river. Significantly, the spirit or the energy of the river gives them in the process, a new sense of self, a renewed energy, restores their hopes and provides “comfort in the soft river’s hugging my body.”

Many view their personal efforts, in a sense, as overcoming their own physical and mental limits, by stepping into the cold water. Yet, during most conversations, swimmers claimed to be renewed, restored, or even healed, in the blue space. As swimmers spoke about their participation in the process of the “change” [physical or mental], while reflecting on their own strength to enter cold water, they also emphasized their belief in the “magical power” of



Fuferna Spa. © The archive of the Museum of the City Susice.

the river, attributed to the river’s “curative sacred agency” (Gammon and Jarrett 2019: 41).

Swimmers’ narratives invite us to think about how their spirituality is part of their construct of health and wellbeing through their sensory engagements with a blue space. For participants in this study, the river holds a curative magical agency constituted in the materiality of the water. To many I interviewed, the Otava River is a “sacred water place” (Strang 2015).

When people imagine the magical powers of the river, and its movement between material and non-material domains as they “think with flow” (Strang 2015: 35), they become part of movements composing social and environmental relations. In Strang’s sense, water is imagined as a generic life source, an essential substance from which all life is created and which maintains health, through all human and non-human flow (Strang 2015). Further in relation to Strang’s holistic understanding, Doughty points out, that examining

the curative properties of blue spaces, considering individual sensory engagements, allows for a shift in medical knowledge as well as offering new positions for cure-seekers from a “passive patient” towards a participatory patient. (Doughty 2019: 80–81) I agree with Doughty in that paying attention to embodied sensory experiences in blue space is to acknowledge that the impact that such engagements may have on wellbeing and health is relational, intersubjective and situated in time and place.

In their testimonies, people emphasized their active engagement with an agency of the Otava, through their sensory knowledge, which as they indicated, restores their sense of self. The swimmer’s physical and emotional satisfaction from their engagements with the river was evident from narratives of swimmers across generations. Their narratives reflect the joy people feel from their habitation in the Otava blue space. When articulating their relationship with the river, they spoke about the sensory experiencing the blue



Fuferna Spa. © The archive of the Museum of the City Susice.

space and when they described multiple levels of sensing such as haptic, aromatic, visual, and sonic. Exploring the therapeutic ramifications of multisensory encounters, as it is evident from my fieldwork, the swimmers in the Otava consciously participate in healing and restorative rituals in the blue space of the river. Savoring blue space, as participants say, helps enhance the positive experiences in their lives and gives them a meaningful life episode contributing to their spiritual time. Emotional and experiential responses to the therapeutic property of blue space, as this study allows us to see, can nurture and improve people's sense of their health. Based on such accounts, contributing to their sense of healthy living, their daily engagement with the river during the spring, summer, and fall seasons, people draw physical, mental and spiritual strength.

Coming down from the Sumava Mountains, the Otava is "enchanting" for many swimmers. The regular swim in the cold river is more than satisfying; the swimmers say it is a transformative, healing, and even magical experience. Curative qualities are recognized by the swimmers I interviewed on several levels: 1. reducing stress levels by immersing oneself in water, 2. pleasant sensory experiencing, such as joy from visual effects of light and colors on the water changing in eyesight, or the sounds of water, and sense of touch when the body is affected by the coldness or softness of the water, 3. engagement with the river as an active step

in healing and caring for one's body, 4. experiencing "nature" in a modern world as a form of belonging to an ecological system, and 5. believing in the magical healing agency of the river.

Current, ongoing eco-health research suggests, that the personal engagement with the environment is one of the paths to develop ethics of care and active competence in addressing the growing environmental crisis. In this essay, I argue that the health and wellbeing of humanity are well embodied in world-ecology. I agree with Veronika Strang that there is no health, either for humans or for the environment, without water (Strang 2004,

2015). The Otava River is for many local people in Susice an organic sense "the pulse," connecting people in this city by breaking social boundaries and as some swimmers expressed in our conversations, the river is to them "the life" and "the element of truth." In the absence of a separation between the ecological, the social, and the individual, moving beyond an anthropocentric view of the health benefits provided by the environment. "We inhabit our environment; we are part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too," wrote Ingold in *Being Alive* (1995: 95).



Swimmers. © Jana Kopelent Rehak.

## REFERENCES

- Doughty, K. 2019. From Water as Curative Agent to Enabling Waterscapes: Divers Experiences of the Therapeutic Blue. In Foley, R., Kearns, R., Kistemann, T. et al. (eds.), *Blue Space, Health and Wellbeing: Hydrophilia Unbounded*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Durkheim, E. 1965. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Gammon, S., Jarratt, D. 2019. Keeping Leisure in Mind: The Intervening Role of Leisure in the Blue Space-Health Nexus. In Foley, R., Kearns, R., Kistemann, T. et al. (eds.), *Blue Space, Health and Wellbeing: Hydrophilia Unbounded*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books: New York.
- Glucklich, A. 1997. *The End of Magic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greenwood, S. 2005. *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness*. Oxford: Berg.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Foley, R., Kearns, R., Kistemann, T. et al. (eds.), *Blue Space, Health and Wellbeing: Hydrophilia Unbounded*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Frazer, J. 1935. *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

- Ingold, T. 1987. *The Appropriation of Nature*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Ingold, T. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Malinowski, B. 1954. *Magic, Science and Religion*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Mauss, M. 1972. *A General Theory of Magic*. New York: The Norton Library.
- Pandian, A., McLean, S. eds. 2017. *Crumpled Paper*. Durham, London: Duke University Press
- Parson, M. 2019. *Environmental Uncertainty and Muddy Blue Space: Health, History and Wetland Geographies in Aotearoa New Zealand*. In Foley, R., Kearns, R., Kistemann, T. et al. (eds.), *Blue Space, Health and Wellbeing: Hydrophilia Unbounded*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Salazar, F., Pink, S., Irving, A. et al. 2017. *Anthropologies and Futures: Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Stoller, P. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stoller, P. 1997. *Sensory Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Strang, V. 2004. *The Meaning of Water*. Berg: Oxford and New York.
- Strang, V. 2015. *Water: Nature and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.