What Is a River?

A report about a picture book on rivers

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by

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Part I

ABSTRACT

My project is a picture book about rivers and the plentiful connections they have with us humans. It follows a child and her grandma as they look for answers to a question – what is a river? In their imaginary expedition, they discover rivers flowing in the sky and in living organisms; meet pilgrims and conquistadores, magical shape-shifting river dolphins and older-than-dinosaurs species of sturgeons; fish and bathe; gathering all the stories they participate in into their own story about the river.

The book combines factual information, various stories from riverine environments as well as more loose associations and metaphors. The themes I touch upon include folklore, myths, daily needs of people rivers cater to, cultural metaphors, environmental problems, peculiarities of plants and animals, history, language etc.

Every spread of the book is like a different chapter about different meanings rivers might have in different contexts. The book tells about a river as a journey, home, a refreshment, a name, a meeting place, a riddle, memory, depth, energy, a reflection, a path, the ocean; and as a thread that connects stories of different times and places.

To make my book, I used a variety of materials, including pencils, watercolours, gouache, digital drawing; and a collection of geographical, historical, mythological references I have gathered as well as my own memories of growing up close to a river. I have tried to balance both factually accurate and poetic storytelling to create a story of interconnectedness and wonder.

The key questions I worked with were: how to tell a story about natural environment in an engaging way; how to find a narrative structure that would communicate my story effectively and would have its inner logic; how to deal with issues of historical consciousness, ecological awareness, management of natural resources in a context of children’s books; how to encourage readers to think about relations of their physical and emotional environments.

The title of the book is What Is a River?. It is supposed to be for children, but also for adults who would find the subject interesting.

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Rivers have many powers: they carry sediments and sentiments, revive lands and minds, connect places and times. They are sources of life and of conflict; paths of stories traveling the Earth. Their flow constantly reminds us – we all live downstream, or upstream, from someone, we are all neighbours.

In the following pages, I will discuss how I came up with the idea to make a picture book about rivers as my degree project for my Master of Visual Communication at Konstfack, various meanders that I went through while making it, and what the process of making it brought to me.
Part II

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

In this part I am going to tell about the background of my project and why I set out to make it at all. Firstly, I go back to my initial fascination with geography, and see how it lead me to my current art practise. Then I proceed to describe various sources of inspiration, encouragement and opposition and how they relate to my project.

I will not stick to a strict timeline of my creative and research process in this part, but rather arrange my text according to how I think the scope of my project is best revealed for a reader, for whom my ideas would be new.

School times: geography and imaginary maps

I have been interested in geography for a long time.

At school it was one of my favourite lessons. For a short period, I considered studying it at university, and I devoted a lot of time preparing for national and international student Olympiads while at school. I liked that the subject was so broad. And that it taught me about the environment I was in and the processes that shaped it. Its curriculum demonstrated to me how physics, sociology, history and biology are all connected and taught me to notice traces of their interaction in my surroundings.

Little did I think at that time that this notion of interconnectivity would become very important to how I approach my artistic and storytelling practise now.

About the same time at school, me, my sister and one of our classmates had a peculiar hobby for breaks between lessons: map-making. We would meet and say – let’s make a map. And we would know quite exactly what kind of map that would be: not a map of a real location or a specific area, but one to include a lot of imaginary places, usually a certain geographical phenomenon with some attributes, like a Valley of Baddies, or a Peaceful Forest of Four-Leaf Shamrocks, or a Scouring Tornado, and so on. Some of them we were really fond of, like a River Flowing to the Sewage, and they reoccurred in our drawings many times.

This is how our maps looked:
Figure 1. An example of maps made by me, my sister Agnė Ulytė, and our friend Austė Grigaitė from ~2008 (words in Lithuanian)

I think these were some of the earlier examples of my artworks that involved exploration of a place in general, a subject that a lot of my later projects were based on.

My earlier works: exploring a place

I did not chose geography studies but instead went on to study printmaking and illustration at the Art Academy in Vilnius.

While studying there, I came to realise that something I enjoyed mostly working with were projects where I took a kind of ethnographical approach, collecting stories about a certain place and arranging them into a narrative. My method would often involve picking stories from different times and contexts and looking for their possible connections. A place for me in this process would function as a space where this meeting of different stories could happen.

Let me touch upon a couple of examples of projects where I chose a specific place and built narratives around it.

One example was my BA degree project: a collection of paper-cut houses, layered with characters, texts and other things. The houses were based on the real wooden houses of Žvėrynas, a district of Vilnius where I spent all my childhood. I used their exterior shapes to model my houses after, but I inhabited them with stories I mostly made up myself. The name
'Žvėrynas’ means a menagerie or a bestiary in Lithuanian, and I was keen to explore the possible connotations of this name in relation to the current environment.

Here are several paper houses from my collection:

Another project was (and is, as it still develops) a comics blog about crossroads of Vilnius, called Meetings of Streets, www.gatviususitikimai.lt (in Lithuanian). This is a collaborative project, which I art-direct. In our comics, we choose a crossroad of two streets and imagine what would happen if the characters (or objects) after which the streets are named met. We try to bring up funny or otherwise interesting coincidences, looking for possible points of dialogue.

Below is an example of one of my comics. It is about the crossroad of streets named after A. Goštautas, a nobleman of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 16th century, and A. Tumėnas, one of Lithuanian MPs of the Interwar Republic. Here they meet and argue how best to call the government, providing names from their times:
Yet another example – one that directly laid foundation for my current project – was a series of short comics about different rivers that I was drawing time to time.

Here they are (translations are written in brown on top):
Figure 4. The Muddy Neris

Figure 5. The Grand Mississippi
Figure 6. The Dark Thames

Figure 7. The Tender Šventoji
Apparently, these comics were not about a specific river. The river was a pretext to tell a personal story, to have an initial reference for my associations. Though I just made them without any particular purpose, now I find them to be some small-scale try-outs of the idea that I wanted to develop into a bigger project during my Master course – to use a natural geographical object as an agent, or as a vehicle, to tell stories about the world. At some time, it occurred to me that rivers, due to their ability to be starting points to many interesting cultural, historical, metaphorical and even typographical associations, actually, was a very good theme for my purposes. Besides, they carried with them some personal emotional ties, something that made the subject dear to me.

My connection with rivers

I do not know when I have learned to walk along a river and think, and who taught me to do so. But I know that it was my grandmother who taught me to go to a riverside, find a nice spot, take out my pencils and draw.

All my childhood I have lived close to a river. I have only rarely used to call it by its name, the Neris, more often referring to it just as the River. And so did my relatives and friends. It had this special privilege to be called not by a name, as a friend, but referred as a relative, like a grandma or an aunt. Now, in Uppsala, where I am based at the moment, I also live near a river and cycle along it to the station to get to Konstfack.

What else comes to mind when I try down to pin down my connection with rivers?

A spine of a book of Lithuanian folk tales, called Gyvasis vanduo, or The Living Water, in our bookshelf – its typography: huge white letters on a black background – vividly coming into sight every time I went to take out a book from there.

A story I heard a few years ago, from participants of the Lithuanian expedition to Siberia¹, about a deported Lithuanian woman who was separated from her relatives – she would come down to the river and gaze upon the water, hoping the river would carry her gaze to her beloved ones at home to a faraway land.

A story my great-grandmother used to tell me, about her mother who would have to wash clothes of rich people in a river in wintertime. Imagine, these were hard times, right? She would add.

A song I imagine hearing when I walk along any river, calling me home. You see, the name of my hometown Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, originates from vilnyti – a Lithuanian word, describing the gentle movement of river waves.

¹ The expedition is called Misija Sibiras and takes place every year. A group of selected people, usually students or youths, travels to various places in Siberia, where a lot of Lithuanians were involuntarily deported during Soviet repressions. They meet Lithuanian people still living there, talk with them, and tidy up old burial grounds.
I applied to Konstfack with two quite loose project proposals, not having thought through all of that mentioned above. I reflected and noticed all the relations only later, when formulating my project plan more and more precisely throughout the course.

At the time of application, however, I just knew that I wanted to work with stories and layering of them, finding ways to expand a linear narrative by shifting contexts and exploring forms that would contain composite storytelling into a single entity. And I knew I wanted to work with subjects that would let me to look for connections between places and cultures.

One of my proposals was supposed to be an exploration and somewhat revival of traditional folk tales. I was interested in how lots of folk tales from different countries have the same basic plotlines and could be catalogued according to them\(^2\). I had done some research in the Lithuanian Institute of Folklore before and hoped to use it in possible future projects.

And the other was about rivers. I was thinking about their presence in many fields of human lives and how interesting that would be to work with. I was also very much drawn to the visual possibilities, imagining long detailed drawing of riverbanks, maybe some spatial paper scenographies. I was not sure about working methods or research questions, I was more thinking about the general themes.

Though early on after my acceptance I abandoned my first proposal and decided to concentrate on rivers, one peculiar observation from folklore-related research stick with me. In some Lithuanian folk tales, or, to be more precise, in legends about origins of some places, significant characters were flying lakes. People would have to guess their name, and only then a lake would descend from the sky and settle on the earth. So I was thinking: but what is it, a flying lake? What is it that flies? Is it just the water, or is it water contained in some shape? Are there any fish inside? And what about water plants? And then forthwith: is it not as it could be similarly with rivers? Maybe I should just ask, but what is a river? Water that flows? Water between with the coasts? An ecosystem? But also – a metaphor? A symbol?

I knew I wanted to work with both geographical, natural aspects of rivers, but also with cultural and philosophical. But what method should I employ to be able to talk about a natural object, constrained by geographical location, and expand my storytelling into different times and cultures? How to generalise a multitude of places, as every river is a specific place, and still keep factual references? These were questions I stumbled upon from the very beginning of my project. At first I did not know how to solve them. I will expand how I came up with my answers later in the PROCESS part of the report.

For now, I will say that I came to realise that after asking myself, what is a river, the apparent resolution was that it was a meeting place of time and place. A river itself was a link, with its constant flow connecting not only different locations, but also times. The sense of neighbourhood, of connectedness, I realised was an intrinsic feature of rivers, and having this in mind, I knew I found a foundation which I could use to weave all the associations about

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\(^2\) I have in mind the Arne-Thompson classification system, that folklorists use to index types of tales.
rivers around. For they themselves were interesting on their own, but in my plans they had to function as helping means to tell the main message, something that motivated me to do such a project – one that would emphasize various links a natural object has with human lives – at all.

So what were my messages

I knew I wanted to talk about the interconnectedness between people and ecosystems, places and the meaning they have in people’s minds. I want to bring up beautiful and harmful connections between nature and us. In this world of today where people often behave carelessly, altering ecosystems with ever greater power, I think it is important to sense the connection to our surroundings, to understand that our physical and natural environment does not exists on its own, but influences our lives in many direct and indirect ways – and that we influence it as well. I want the selfish exploitation of natural resources to stop. By presenting a broad spectrum of stories I hope to inspire people to become more attentive to the riches the nature gives us: food not just for body but for thought as well, energy not only for power plants but for dreams too.

I want to encourage the sense of neighbourhood. My aim is to hint people at the dependency on nature and on each other. This notion of co-living, of sharing the world with one another, of understanding that our actions influence not only our immediate surroundings, but may affect people living in other places, I think is really important.

I was striving to challenge the limitations of describing places as mere locations, hoping to make people reconsider their attitudes about what is local and what is global, and show that those two notions are not contradictory, but ultimately connected.

I felt that with the help of rivers and water in general, in this world divided by nationalities, religions, race, class I could show and celebrate connections between places and cultures, between all of us.

My research: summary of sources of information, inspiration, encouragement, and disagreement

Research was a very important part of the development of my project and for turning my general ideas into a tangible work.

Basically, my research could be divided into two parts: one is material that I included into my project directly, and another is references I used to draw inspiration from or argue with.
The first part was made up of various documentary and factual sources, such as encyclopaedias, documentaries, magazines, webpages of environmental projects, news articles, blogs, old and contemporary photos, artworks from different times, descriptions of museum artefacts, various maps, ethnographic records, as well as accounts of recollections about rivers, including my own memories and observations.

The second part includes references that I used to contextualise my project, sometimes inspired to borrow something from them, sometimes arguing with them and motivated to exert myself to making a better work than they did. Generally, they were texts by authors exploring relevant concepts (like maps, metaphors, locality, place) or talking about rivers in some conceptual way; works of artists working with nature as a subject; projects that tried to plot a theme in a way similarly as I did; ancient map-making practise; and – having decided that my project is going to be a picture book and how it will be on the whole structured – a lot of certain picture books: non-fiction ones about nature, structured as collections, or with a river as the main theme.

I will talk more about the first group of references and how I used the found material later in the PROCESS part.

For now, I will proceed with reflection of the different kinds of sources of the second group, explaining how they contributed to my project.

References: some books with relevant themes

I have read some books that were not directly connected with my subject, but, upon starting them, promised some relevant knowledge and broadening my mind. These were Metaphors We Live By by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson³, Space and Place by Yi-Fu Tuan⁴, Place by Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar⁵ and What We See When We Read by Peter Mendelsund⁶.

Though not exactly connected with my work, they were interesting reads. Their contribution was mainly the encouragement to stick with the research questions I wanted to explore – how I could tell stories about the world using specific facts, or, how to explain the world in terms of other smaller things; and how places, or geographically bound objects, could be used to achieve that.

⁶ Mendelsund, Peter. What We See When We Read. Vintage, 2014. Print.
There was a certain kind of texts I was particularly interested in, namely, texts that would talk about rivers not only in physical, but also in social and historical contexts.

I read majority of the texts about rivers as agents of cultural and social change when I had already advanced into narrowing down my project into research questions that could be communicated to others, when I had already started thinking about all the possible fields I should include into my project. Thus I should say that these texts were not initial reasons I started thinking about all these things. Rather, I was intentionally searching for them, and when I stumbled upon them, I was really happy that someone was thinking similarly. Of course, it would be unfair to say that I was not influenced by them and came up with all my ideas myself. These texts resonated with my thoughts, and with their beautifully arranged words helped me to fine-tune my project plan description, suggested a right word for the script I was creating for my book, and helped me to decide what were the most relevant themes to include in my book.

Here, I will quote some passages and try to untangle how they connect with certain parts of my project. It would be hard and of no use to pinpoint every reference, but I think that showing a few specific examples would shine some light on how something I read found a way into my project.

I put passages that were most important to me in bold.

Firstly, there was this essay “Rivers” by Czeslaw Milosz. Because it is short, I will quote it in full:

“So lasting they are, the rivers!” Only think. Sources somewhere in the mountains pulsate and springs seep from a rock, join in a stream, in the current of a river, and the river flows through centuries, millennia. Tribes, nations pass, and the river is still there, and yet it is not, for water does not stay the same, only the place and the name persist, as a metaphor for a permanent form and changing matter. The same rivers flowed in Europe when none of today’s countries existed and no languages known to us were spoken. It is in the names of rivers that traces of lost tribes survive. They lived, though, so long ago that nothing is certain and scholars make guesses which to other scholars seem unfounded. It is not even known how many of these names come from before the Indo-European invasion, which is estimated to have taken place two thousand to three thousand years B.C. Our civilization poisoned river waters, and their contamination acquires a powerful emotional meaning.

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7 Who, by the way, grew up in Lithuania.
a river is a symbol of time, we are inclined to think of a poisoned time. And yet the sources continue to gush and we believe time will be purified one day. I am a worshipper of flowing and would like to entrust my sins to the waters, let them be carried to the sea.”

What is important here for me, is this focus on rivers connecting different times and outliving cultures, and at the same time, containing memories of them. Also, I like how the pollution of rivers is transformed into a metaphor and broadened to mean not just water, but also the present time.

Another corresponding excerpt is from “Rivers and Stories: An Introduction” by Robert Hass, an introduction to a book The Gift of Rivers, edited by Pamela Michael. There, he says that people not only poisoned rivers, but also banished them from the consciousness of our society:

“<....> Though the names are still magic—Amazon, Congo, Mississippi, Niger, Plate, Volga, Tiber, Seine, Ganges, Mekong, Rhine, Colorado, Marne, Orinoco, Rio Grande—the rivers themselves have almost disappeared from consciousness in the modern world. Insofar as they exist in our imaginations, that existence is nostalgic. We have turned our memory of the Mississippi into a Mark Twain theme park at Disneyland. Our railroads followed the contours of the rivers and then our highways followed the contours of the rail lines. Traveling, we move as a river moves, at two removes. Our children don't know where their electricity comes from, they don't know where the water they drink comes from, and in many places on the earth the turgid backwaters of dammed rivers are inflicting on local children an epidemic of the old riverside diseases: dysentery, schistosomiasis, "river blindness." Rivers and the river gods that defined our civilizations have become the sublimated symbols of everything we have done to the planet in the last two hundred years. And the rivers themselves have come to function as trace memories of what we have repressed in the name of our technical mastery. They are the ecological unconscious.”

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Which is, I would say, true. I liked a lot how these texts managed to generalise rivers and their meaning in society. I tried to capture similar notions in the chapters about rivers as memory and rivers as reflection in my book. Rivers indeed are storages of past: they keep ancient species and ancient names, they keep chemicals from factories and agriculture – and bring them back to us. And rivers reflect – not only as shiny surfaces mirroring what is above them, but also as summaries of mischiefs and misbehaviours that is around them.

Then, I read a book called Rivers: A Very Short Introduction by Nick Middleton\textsuperscript{10}. Besides a lot of interesting facts, this book had another great feature – it was divided into 5 chapters of river-based themes, composed around roles rivers have in nature, mythology, history, culture, and industry. Now that was a clever way to arrange information, I thought – because I myself had been thinking about how to structure all the material I had. I had already come up with the solution to divide my material into categories that would tell different meanings of rivers in different contexts. This book suggested some to add, namely, that rivers are barriers and links\textsuperscript{11}.

Another notion which I found interesting was of a river as a story. The use of a metaphor of a story flowing as a river is probably quite a common and recognisable one. I was attracted to how it was expanded in the same essay by Robert Hass:

“… Rivers, of course, are like stories, and they are like stories that classical strictures on form would approve. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In between, they flow. Or would flow, if we let them. It’s interesting to consider the fact that, in popular culture, in commercial television, what’s happened to rivers has happened to stories. A dam is a commercial interruption in a river.”\textsuperscript{12}

From the beginning of my project development, I wanted to find a narrative structure that would somehow naturally grow from my subject. I spent a lot of time thinking over various parts of rivers – like sources, islands, meanders, waterfall etc. – and could I employ them while structuring my plotline. Should I include texts of separate stories like some islands in a river? Should I abruptly change the course of the plotline like in a sudden meander? However, later I realised that I could better solve this question not with regard to physical properties of rivers, but to the very conventional metaphor of river as a story. It occurred to me that if I emphasized that the story of rivers I tell in my book is actually a story, one possible narrative, I could also stress the neighbourhood knowing a certain story establishes.

So, to sum up, these and other writings considerably provoked my thought. But – fluid and


\textsuperscript{11} Later I decided to incorporate them under other chapters.

\textsuperscript{12} Hass, p. 26
rightful as they were on their own, I felt that these texts as such were not enough. They were for adults who would probably, as me, find them while looking for a specific theme, or as introductions, or between other texts – and they would reach their readers somewhat diluted. From the very beginning of my project, I was thinking about possible and communicative ways to talk about nature and ecosystems: how to choose such a way of talking that would make nature an interesting and urgent topic, that could stand on its own, like, for instance, relations between people. I felt that talking about our relations with nature was something reserved for green activists, scientists, or kids\textsuperscript{13}. I exaggerate here, but such was my feeling when I was presenting my ideas in the beginning of my Master course in Konstfack. Well, maybe I was mistaken.

Anyway, I felt that such kind of storytelling, mixing facts in a poetical, emotional way, was necessary, but it needed certain backing, some other platform. Therefore, I felt that if I made something that would contain similar thoughts and information, it would not just repeat just the same theme, but if composed cleverly would make a useful work and original work.

References: works of some artists

Another source of inspiration for me was fine art works by some several artists working with nature and geography as their main theme.

The most significant of them was Maya Lin. Her thoughts about how to attract attention to the subjects that are important to you, using art, related to my methods. She speaks about trying to make people see the subject in its entirety in order to protect it; about trying to make people look at subject differently in order to notice details; about balancing the scientific with the handmade in order to create an object that not merely acts as an idea of information, but that becomes its own form – evocative, beautiful, and strange\textsuperscript{14}.

Another artist was Kathy Prendergast and especially her work *Lost* (1999). It is a print of a typical map of the US which has all but those containing a word ‘Lost’ place names removed\textsuperscript{15}. I liked how she took a familiar object and transformed it, not by recreating it, but by selecting what layer of information is made visible; and by doing so, made me look anew to the representation of a land. I was also keen to explore the possibilities of layering the information, and this artwork was an example of a similar approach.

\textsuperscript{13} I ultimately decided that my book will be for kids – but not solely for them.
\textsuperscript{14} http://omart.org/exhibitions/maya_lin/ accessed 2016-12-02
\textsuperscript{15} Further description here: http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/prendergast-lost-p78411 Accessed 2016-12-02
Continuing speaking of maps, I have to point to another great source of inspiration: ancient map-making practice. Or, to be precise, certain kind of maps, known as *mappae mundi* – maps from medieval Europe concerned not so much with precise representation of locations and distances as with general principles.

Their view was schematic and unrealistic, but it was never meant to navigate. They were rather made to depict the current world view, functioning as concise encyclopaedias of contemporary knowledge, besides descriptions of places including fauna, flora, mythology, history.

I was much drawn to maps like these:

![Figure 8. The Ehsfort mappa mundi, 13th c. | Wikipedia Commons](image)
I have been fascinated with these maps for a long time. For sure, our genre of break-time map-making came about out of a sheer wish to recreate something similar\textsuperscript{16}. Later on, I discovered that a lot of creative people were still making similar spectacular maps. But those medieval maps have remained my initial reference, and so here I mention only them.

\textsuperscript{16} I remember regretting the fact in my childhood that map-makers would no longer set out to draw maps by hand.
From those maps comes my methods of arranging and layering information on a page. They demonstrated for me how it is possible to put on a single surface stories of different sorts, and at the same time maintain some indication of geographical context. They suggested ways to divide my narrative into the main story, flowing from page to page, and some additional references, or labels, which were besides the main text. Furthermore, they contained a mood of wonder and exploration which I wanted to keep. Overall, maybe their influence is not so directly noticeable in my project, but I feel I borrowed from them a lot of visual and conceptual tools.

References: The Island Review

While looking for interesting stories about rivers on the internet, I accidentally found a webpage called The Island Review, www.theislandreview.com, which, in their own words, is “an online magazine dedicated to great writing and visual art that comes from, is inspired by, celebrates or seeks to understand the extraordinary appeal of islands, as places and as metaphors.”

Here is how one of the pages looks like:

17 http://theislandreview.com/about-us/ accessed 2016-12-03
Their description was similar to what I was doing, except the subject and the medium. But that was, at the time, a pleasant coincidence and encouragement for me to stick to my methods.

References: some picture books about rivers

Having decided that I am going to make a picture book, I started researching other picture books about rivers. Due to my lack of proper knowledge of other languages, my research was limited to books published in English (and to a smaller extent, in Swedish and Lithuanian). I looked through libraries, bookshops, publishing sites, internet blogs, and found not so small a collection of various books about rivers, both about specific rivers and about the general course of a river.

A selection of titles is enclosed in the APPENDIXES.
The books about were beautiful and interesting. However, though they are quite different between themselves – some concentrate on the natural environment rivers flow through, some on emotional connections they have with people – they all, in my opinion, lack a broader perspective. I noticed that they usually focus on one aspect of a river life, like changing variety of landscapes, or animals that live nearby; or talk about one specific river; or talk about a river in general, but as about a natural object.

When I found that there are so many other picture books about rivers I had some doubts whether I should do another one at all. But, actually, I have not come upon any that would explore rivers in a similar way as I intended. With my project I wanted to reveal the complexity of the subject, to explore the archetype that through different places and times remained important to different people in different ways. I have to add that I did not intend to make an all-including narrative – which is certainly not possible. Rather, my goal was to create a kind of personal map of the river life, in a way going beyond geography, focusing on themes that I find important, while keeping the spectrum of stories broad and inclusive.

References: some other picture books or illustrated books

There was a bunch of other picture books I looked up to. Mostly they were non-fiction books that were either collections of stories or dealt with factual information in a personal, even sentimental, way and told it in an engaging narrative, both for kids and for adults.

Some examples I researched are also included in the APPENDIXES.

These books taught me some important lessons: how to keep your personal voice within facts, how to develop a narrative out of separate details, how to be brave dealing with vast amounts of data.
Part IV

PROCESS OF THE PROJECT

Here, I will discuss my major visual and conceptual decisions that led to the final outcome of my project – a printed picture book. I divided this chapter into subchapters Research, Structure, My position, Characters, Style and Technique, Composition of spreads, Text, Final outcome, and Tutoring and Feedback. Their order here is more or less defined by the chronological development of my ideas about the project; however, this order is not everywhere consistent.

Research

I had some stories about rivers from the beginning of my Master course. I call them stories, but actually they were an array of different pieces of material: memories, facts, associations, not necessarily having an inner narrative, but rather containing details that were interesting for me.

These different stories formed my perception of a river as an object possible to approach from multiple perspectives. I knew I wanted to communicate this complex nature of rivers with my project, though at first I was not sure what research direction I should take. Should I focus on my local river, or choose some selected specific rivers in the world, or research rivers in
general? How will I pick my stories – should I work with my personal stories, get in touch with other people to gather their stories, or use some indirect sources?

After some consideration and encouragement from my external tutor Joanna Hellgren, I made a decision to keep the scope of the project broad and research rivers in general. I decided not to travel anywhere but base my research on sources that were available for me in my surroundings: internet, books, museums, my memories.

My classmate graphic designer Benedetta recommended me a web tool Dropmark, which I used to collect the webpages that were relevant to me in one place. Besides, I was noting in my notebooks associations, problems, metaphors, quotations from various books – all things about rivers.

![Figure 12. Screenshot of my Dropmark webpage with collection of links](image)

Simultaneously, I began compiling a database of 10x10 cm square cards with simple sketches summarising different river stories. In this way, they were convenient to arrange in different ways and look for narratives that might emerge from possible connections between them. In total, I made about 150 of these cards.
When I presented the cards in one of the feedback sessions, someone commented that they could be the final outcome themselves and my project could take advantage of the loose, wandering, associative qualities they have. However, I had decided that my project would be a picture book where I guided the gaze of the readers myself. That guidance had to be generous and encouraging to explore.

Structure

I decided that my project is going to be a non-fiction picture book. Then, the question I had to solve was what kind of narrative structure I was going to employ to tell about the story of the complexity of rivers. I was looking for a structure whose inner logic would be based on the story. Over time, I considered several different ideas. I could base the storytelling on the course of a physical river: to make my book as an expedition through different parts of a river – a source, a meander, an island, a beaver’s dam, a waterfall and so on; and have stories connected to these parts in appropriate places. Or, I could have my material structured like a collection in different chapters, like in an atlas – only that that would be an atlas with categories I came up with. But then, how not to lose the notion of flow in a story about rivers?

Eventually, I came up with a solution of how I could balance all these three approaches, but it took some time experimenting and meandering.

As the question of structure was crucial for me from the beginning of my project, I will briefly outline my process of how I came up with my solution.
Firstly, I started thinking of possible categories that could be used to group stories from the huge pile of sketches into small narratives. The point of this method was to have certain excuses to link stories of different sorts; to think of direct or poetical, metaphorical ways different stories related to each other.

I came up with categories like: Invisible rivers, Noticeable rivers, Letters of rivers, Giants of rivers, Undulations of rivers, Memories of rivers, Bathers of rivers etc.

Figure 14. One of the categories: Invisible rivers

Figure 15. One of the categories: Letters of rivers

Figure 16. One of the categories: Bathers of rivers
Then, I was thinking how to make a system or a common ground for my categories. I decided that they should tell different things a river might be – *all* rivers, *every* river: they should be relevant to *any* river.

Finally, out of the list of different categories I chose to include into my book Journey, Home, Refreshment, Name, Meeting place, Riddle, Memory, Depth, Energy, Reflection, Path, Ocean (while Colour, Lesson, Smell, Barrier, Sound and some other were left aside).

Those categories offered me a way to include under them material that was direct, but besides it, also indirect, associative, problematic. I thought that every category would have been turned into a chapter of two spreads, one containing physical properties of rivers, and another dealing with more metaphorical aspects.

I made a few storyboards with different numbers of chapters and arrangements of categories and stories.
Figure 18. One of sketch storyboards
However, these storyboards lacked some inner reason why these stories were relevant to tell at all. How they are connected in the context of my book? Are they just a compilation of interesting stories or is there a certain inner urge to tell them? For me, that flow of story I was so willing to have was not there. I could not figure out how to get it. Feedback from my tutors and classmates added to the confusion. They questioned my position in the narrative. What is
your voice? What do you want to tell? What is your story in the context of rivers? Why have you abandoned your personal stories?

I once again started sketching a storyboard anew, this time focusing more not on the categories, but on the images I knew I wanted to draw.

And in this process, two images appeared that suddenly helped me to stitch my story together: a grandma embroidering and a girl letting a flower wreath to flow into a river. They will tell the story, while not being in the story actively participating.

And a river, besides the categories I had come up earlier, will be also a thread – a physical thread on the grandma’s fabric and in the wreath, holding flowers together, and a figurative thread that embroiders stories on the world and stitches the stories into this book that I am making.
My position

The issue of my personal voice surfaced now and again when I presented my developing project for feedback. I perceived myself as a narrator, guiding the attention of readers, but not leading them, like a storyteller of traditional *cantastorias*, who would point to pictures and tell stories, but not be involved in the pictures directly.

I wanted to find a position for myself in my book in which I could point not only to the stories, but also to their connections. A position that would allow me to connect local and global, and in this way, let me talk about different ways rivers come to us, pleasant and refreshing, but also troubling and terrifying, and emphasize that these ways are ultimately connected. I wanted to talk about problems of historical consciousness and ecology; about how small things affect great systems; about how we are all a part of narrative even though we do not recognise it.
I was looking for a metaphor that could allow me to develop my narrative based on certain visual poetry.

Let me dwell a little more of the two little sketches. I developed them a little more:

![Figure 24. Developed sketch with a grandmother](image)

![Figure 25. Developed sketch with a flowers wreath](image)

The wreath in my drawing appeared here from a Lithuanian tradition of a Midsummer – the folk culture that I treasure and that is part of my background. Young girls would throw wreaths into flowing water, hoping that the wreaths will be taken out by someone, who would become their lovers. For me, that was a story of hope and longing. But how should I deal with this story – as an ethnographical case, an example of a certain riverine tradition, taking an outsider’s view or can I use it somehow differently?
What else? If I am to be personal, as my tutors advised, then I should think about my river. And what is my river? I have mentioned it earlier already – I treated my river as a grandmother, because I could call them both without a name, just with my relation to them.

And so I sketched a grandmother. She was embroidering.

Now, how can they be put together?

I reconsidered my recent sketches.

What is a wreath, after all? It is made of different flowers, put together. It is hollow, and you can look through it like through a window. It flows where the current carries it. It is from nature, it appears in the world, and then it decomposes. It leaves no traces behind, only ripples. It is round. It is hollow, and you can look through it like through a window.

And then, I remembered the ancient Greek legend of the Oceanus, the all-encompassing river. If you reconsider it, it is the water cycle – eternal movement of water through times, places, organisms. A round cycle connecting us all.

And how is the grandma to embroider, if she was to take her handicraft to a riverside? She could use a nice round embroidery hoop. Her embroidered patterns would show through it, coming to being as she would tell stories.

Suddenly, I knew I had something that could run through my book and hold it together.

And what is a river, then, again? A river would be a thread that makes these stories to appear, to come into being listened to.

I was still to keep the structure of the atlas, with different spreads detailing different aspects of rivers. The readers would travel thought different rivers and their stories while, actually, just
sitting and reading. The characters would travel with the readers page by page, while, actually, they will stay on the riverside and just tell the story. We will embark on an imaginary expedition.

Figure 27. A spread from the finished book

Figure 28. A spread from the finished book
A RIVER IS THE OCEAN.

The ancient Greeks believed that we simple world was encircled by the great river, OCEAN, with not the single drop all water on the Earth, and OCEAN comes from its name.

Figure 29. A spread from the finished book

Figure 30. A spread from the finished book
The two characters that appeared were a girl picking flowers and her grandmother embroidering a tablecloth. The story of a river develops as they sit and talk on the riverside. In consequent spreads, they are involved in different stories imagining themselves to be at different places around the world. Sometimes they are more directly participating, sometimes they are merely observing – sometimes they are more concentrated on the story they are in this imaginary expedition, sometimes they are more present at the riverside.
**Style and technique**

To draw the final illustrations for my book, I used watercolours and colour pencils. I scanned the drawing and assembled them as layers in Photoshop afterwards, refining some details digitally.
Figure 35. My drawing process

Figure 36. Some of my sketches and finished drawings
The final illustrations contain colourful textured drawings as well as some dark grey pencil line-work.

Figure 37: A spread from the finished book with combined different layers of illustrations

**Composition of spreads**

Some spreads of the book are more complex, or scheme-like, in their composition, having many different images combined together, and some are more solid. Some of those more scheme-like spreads are composed around a frame, in such a way that there is an image in the middle of the spread, and additional details around it. This design solution was inspired by a tradition of medieval European and Persian illustrations where the main image is surrounded by greatly decorated margins. With these compositions I tried to resonate the visuality of a window into the world same as I did with the embroidery hoop or the water cycle.
During my examination my opponent noted that these changing compositions throughout the book add dynamics to a reader’s gaze.

In my text I wrote for the book I tried to balance facts about rivers with more poetic, personal passages in order to give facts context and to encourage my readers to think of their own connections with nature.
I had started writing the text for my book separately from drawing illustrations. When I started drawing I realised I needed to adapt the text: shorten it and omit what was repeating itself.

There are three kinds of text in the spreads. The first, in biggest letters, says what is a river and works as a title for the spread. The second, in smaller capital letters, tells the story. And the third, in small light letters, adds notes about specific references for my illustrations.

I have met children’s book author Eva Susso to discuss my manuscript once. I was hoping for some advice how I could make the text shorter and so more suitable for a picture book. She advised me to try to read my text as an outsider, not as the writer; to watch out for factual excerpts that came about seemingly without connection to general storytelling. I abandoned some passages that were not backed by illustrations as a consequence. She also questioned my idea that the story about a river is told by a grandmother to a child as a hierarchical and norm-preserving way of passing knowledge, and suggested that instead it might be the river that tells its story itself. However, for me it was important that the story is coming to the characters as they communicate between themselves, not from outside. So I took away some sentences that directly indicated that it was the grandma who told the story, but I left visual details, like gestures and face expressions that showed involvement of the characters in the story.

I was helped to edit the grammar and in certain places pick better words by Angela Fleury, and editor from the US, who was recommended to me by my friend.

When I was more or less happy with the text, I wrote it down on paper by hand with pencil and pen, scanned, and applied on the spreads digitally.

**Final outcome**

The final outcome is a printed book titled “What Is a River?”.

It has 48 pages including the spreads that tells the story as well as some spreads with additional illustrations in the beginning and the end, title pages, and a couple of pages with additional texts, including acknowledgements and some info about me. The size of the pages is 28x28 cm.

For the final exhibition, I ordered an edition of 20 copies to be printed at Tydtrick in Uppsala: pages on MultiDesign White 170g paper, and covers on similar, only thicker, paper. I bound the books myself in perfect bound\(^\text{18}\): folded the pages, arranged them in four signatures, poked the holes through then on the folds, bound with a waxed thread, strengthened the spine with glue and a piece of soft paper, glued the cover, and trimmed the book with paper-cutting machine at Konstfack.

\[^{18}\text{I did that because it required less time and the price was cheaper.}\]
Part V

EXAMINATION

In this part I am going to tell about how I presented my book at the final spring exhibition, what responses I received and how they contributed to my own understanding of my work.

Exposition

For the exhibition, I planned to present my book and create an installation to exhibit it.

The idea of this installation was to present characters and environments from my book, showing them together in space, not separated by pages, as they are in the book. With this spatial landscape, I wanted to stress the interconnectedness of their stories, to imply that the stories are connected not in a single way. Some could be looked through; some could hide behind each other.

Figure 40. Scheme of my exhibition plan.
I expected to get enough space to hang printed spreads of my book somewhere around. However, when the spots were allocated I got a much tighter place than I had hoped, and had to readjust. I started making my installation, just much scaled down.
Instead of an array of different spreads, I decided to hand on my wall a large print with one of the illustrations from the book. I chose the Oceanus, and printed it at Konstfack’s print shop.

After teachers of Visual Communication visited my exhibition space while I was building it, and I explained to them how it is going to look like, they advised me to take away the paper installation and focus the gaze of the visitors just on the book itself. Due to the lack of space, this was a good suggestion, and I agreed.

To prepare my space, I was helped by one-year-lower Visual Communication students, which was of very great value.

In the final exhibition, my space looked like this:

![Figure 43. My exposition at the exhibition.](image-url)
Figure 44. My exposition at the exhibition.

Figure 45. My exposition in the exhibition.
On one side of the podium, I added a tiny shelf with an empty notebook so that visitors could write here their emails if they wanted to know when the book is published somewhere.
Examination

During the final examination, I received the most comments from two people, invited for the occasion: opponent, practitioner working in the similar field as me, who had read my book in advance and prepared a talk about it, and a person from outside, in this case, a former Konstfack’s librarian, who offered a short and immediate reflection of what she saw at the exhibition.

My opponent was Merav Salomon, a book illustrator and senior lecturer of Illustration from Israel. She talked about many things: of river as a physical and metaphysical entity, of river as a narrative stream, dictated by geography, of different gazes of the grandma and the child, of balance between factual and poetical storytelling, of managing of difficult content of ecology and historical consciousness, of revealed dualities of rivers, of dynamic composition of spreads, of good handwriting, of right size of the pages, of general quality of my book as a meeting point – of myths and of reality, of old and young, of peaceful and of unsettling. I was happy that she noticed many things that I had in mind while creating this book.

Her main question was about the audience the book was supposed to be aimed at. Was it mainly for children, or for adults? What age groups were my book aiming at?

I explained my notion that the book was primarily for kids aged about 8-10, but also for anyone who would find the subject interesting. As a reference, I had myself in mind and what kind of picture books I liked, as an adult. However, I feel that the question about the audience is not completely resolved yet and need revisiting, especially if I am to publish the book.

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Part VI

FINAL RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS

Here, I summarise what I have learned through the process, how tutoring affected me, how my gained knowledge relates to wider contexts.

These two years of the Master of Visual Communication course at Konstfack were interesting and inspiring. I think I gained a lot of useful insights about planning, researching, presenting, working with feedback, and making a long-term project. I hope that these insights contribute to my career as an illustrator working with non-fictional storytelling.

I thought much about relations between local and global, personal and general while doing this project. I had to deal with different issues. How to tell of multitude without detailing every story? How to show connections and dependency between all of us? How to tell stories that come to me by research, stories that are not mine, without danger to slip into one-sided narrative? How to attract attention to the importance of storytelling, how to make people be aware that we are all involved in stories, and that we are all storytellers? How to make people think about what they would like to leave after themselves in the world? How to challenge the limitations of describing places as mere locations, how to make people reconsider their attitudes about what is local and what is global, and show that those two notions are not contradictory, but ultimately connected? I understood that there is no single answer. Still, an attempt to find your own answer is what matters and touches others.

I learned that good communication about a project was of great value. Discussing my project with tutors and at the feedback sessions with my classmates and external guests taught me how to present and fine-tune my ideas. While working on my project, I was tutored by my main tutor, professor Joanna Rubin Dranger, as well as, occasionally, some external tutors and other tutors from Konstfack. Moa Matthis worked with me on contextualising my project in this report. Throughout the two years of the Master course, I also constantly discussed my project with my classmates in feedback sessions and informal meetings. The feedback I received sometimes was encouraging, sometimes perplexing; sometimes it helped me notice what was lacking for good visual communication of my intentions, sometimes motivated me to find arguments for my position.

I see my book in the contexts of non-fiction picture books and other storytellers who work with environment-related problems. I hope that it will not only help people befriend their rivers, but also encourage them so look anew to their surroundings in general.
Part VII

REFERENCE LIST

Books


Internet

Kathy Prendergast, Lost
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/prendergast-lost-p78411 accessed 2016-12-02


Maya Lin: January 29 - May 10, 2015 - Multiple Galleries
http://omart.org/exhibitions/maya_lin/ accessed 2016-12-02

The Island Review
http://theislandreview.com/about-us/ accessed 2016-12-03

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Part VII

APPENDIXES

Edition in brackets is not the first one published, but the one accessed for research.

A collection of picture books and illustrated books about rivers

A River
by Marc Martin
(Published by Penguin Aus, 2015)

River
by Allessandro Sanna
(Published by Enchanted Lion Books, 2014)

A River Ran Wild
by Lynne Cherry
(Published by HMH Books for Young Readers, 2002)

The Last River: John Wesley Powell and the Colorado River Exploring Expedition
written by Stuart Waldman and illustrated by Gregory Manchess
(Published by Mikaya Press, 2005)

River
by Debby Atwell
(Published by HMH Books for Young Readers, 2004)

River of Dreams: The True Story of the Hudson River
by Hudson Talbott
(Published by G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2009)

The Secret River
written by Marjorie Kinnan Rawling and illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon
(Published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2011)

River Story
written by Meredith Hooper and illustrated by Bee Willey
(Published by Walker; Read and Discover edition, 2010)

Song of the Mekong River
written by Na-Mi Choi and illustrated by Sinae Jo
(Published by Big and Small Publishing, 2014)
The River: An Epic Journey to the Sea
by Hanako Clulow
(Published by Caterpillar Books, 2016)

Wonders of Rivers
written by Rae Bains and illustrated by Yoshi Miyake
(Published by Troll Communications, 1998)

On the River
by Roland Harvey
(Published by Allen & Unwin Children's Books, 2016)

Unfolding Journeys: Amazon Adventure
written by Stewart Ross and illustrated by Jenni Sparks
(Published by Lonely Planet, 2016)

Sacred River: The Ganges of India
by Ted Lewin
(Published by HMH Books for Young Readers, 2003)

Where the River Begins
by Thomas Locker
(Published by Puffin Books, 1993)

Some other relevant non-fiction picture books

Seasons
by Blexbolex
(Published by Gecko Press, 2010)

Alle Wetter!
by Britta Teckentrup
(Published by Verlagshaus Jacoby & Stuart GmbH, 2015)

Home
by Carson Ellis
(Published by Candlewick Press, 2015)

My Favorite Things
by Maira Kalman
(Published by Harper Design, 2014)

City Atlas
by Martin Haake
(Published by Wide Eyed Editions, 2016)
Atlas of Remote Islands
by Judith Schalansky
(Published by Penguin, 2010)

What is a Child?
by Beatrice Alemagna
(Published by Tate, 2016)

A First Book of Nature
written by Nicola Davies and illustrated by Mark Hearld
(Published by Walker & Company, 2012)