

Riverscapes

Mirna Šolić

The term “riverscape” originates in freshwater ecology (Cooper at all 2018; Haslam 2008), whereby it is used to describe complex and constantly evolving ecosystems formed by rivers and their natural environments, with the addition of human involvement in these processes, “a blend between the natural and the human” (Haslam 2008: 9). From there the term wended its way to arts ecocritical and cultural studies-oriented scholarship and “liquid turn” in arts and humanities, with recognition of significance of rivers and riverscapes in nation building (Cusack 2010), constructions of identity and hydropolitics (e.g., Boast 2020; Murphy and Rivero 2018). However, there has been very little research of significance of riverscapes in the narratives of migration, except for Katelyn Knox’s article on significance of imperial riverine environments in French context (Knox 2016) and Mirna Šolić’s study of riverscapes in narratives of migration (2025; forthcoming).

There are several reasons at play as to why riverscapes are overseen in narratives of migration. Rivers, unlike seas, are not sites of media-induced spectacles (e.g., Mazzara 2016), the riverine crossings are not widely seen as destabilising the idea of Europe. Instead, rivers and riverscapes are sites of invisible, or rather slow violence, to use Rob Nixon’s term pointing to the existence of acts of violence and violent environments beyond media’s attention, described as “slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that scar nobody” (Nixon 2011: 3). Another reason is an absence of “Mediterranean discursiveness,” a narrow view of the Mediterranean “plaguing the literature, all description and repetition” (Matvejević 1999: 12), even more powerfully disseminated across media and popular culture (Matvejević 1999: 12; see also Kovačević 2019), which cannot be applied to rivers.

In this respect, Tricia Cusack’s suggestion that “every river has its narratives, and some have acquired dominant national meanings through the medium of riverscapes” (2010: 2) mirrors Étienne Balibar’s notion of polysemic nature of borders, and Chiara Brambilla’s consideration of borderscapes as possible sites of contact and exchange (2015). As it appears in literary and cinematic depictions of riverscapes in the context of migration, riverscapes are specific eco-political environments in which the situation of “crisis” is portrayed within a more intimate setting (Šolić 2025). Here, migrations are perceived on the background of changes they instigate in local communities, and local communities’ responses to migration based on their lived experience of (often traumatic) history and political changes.

Rivers feature as prominent parts of treacherous landscapes/crossings on the **Balkan route**, such as the Evros, the Kupa, and the Korana River, with deaths by drowning and casualties reported in media and investigated on film (e.g., Krikellis 2022; Ršumović 2024). However, with perhaps the exception of Rio Grande and a heavily politicised United States-Mexican border, riverine environments largely remain unrecognised or anonymous sites of violence, torture and dying even though similarly to **seas** and **forests** (Hameršak and Pleše 2021), rivers have become **weaponized landscapes** of suffering and violence on the European Union borders and more globally.

5/2/2025

Literature

<https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/6cf91ebbecf5d7cf4d8c36ac8ced6591421432c2cd175a12d79ed092d76d0e49/2397416/s2.pdf>