CHAPTER 1

Displacing the Delta

Notes on the Anthropology of the Earth’s Physical Features

Tanya Richardson

Deltas: ‘Discrete shoreline protuberances where rivers enter oceans, semi-enclosed seas, lakes or lagoons and supply sediments more rapidly than they can be redistributed by basinal processes’.

– Trevor Elliott, ‘Deltas’

This is the sort of place you needed to float over in a hot-air balloon to get any sort of impression of its size and variety. In a boat you moved in man-made corridors from gioł to gioł – lake to lake – with little idea of what lay on either side. Hopefully it was the Danube, learning to have fun.

– Andrew Eames (2009) on navigating the Danube Delta in Romania

When the Old Believers arrived here, what did they see? Something similar to what you see over there: shallow water, reeds, and silt. They dug up the silt to make islands, and mixed it with the reeds to make a house.

– Nikolai Izotov, Russian Old Believer, gardener, pensioner and tour guide from the Danube Delta town of Vylkove, Ukraine

In their studies of the earth’s physical features, anthropologists necessarily begin by making assumptions about what certain entities are (e.g. mountain, river, glacier). Yet they also often leave open the possibility of learning that what these entities are, how they came to be, and the relations that sustain them may not fully correspond with Euro-American scientific knowledge. This is common to anthropologists whether their intellectual projects lean more towards a concern with representation and epistemology (how people view the world) or reality and ontology (what exists in one of many possible worlds), a distinction that anthropologists affiliated with the ontological turn have drawn most sharply (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pederson 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2003, 2004). For examples of the former, consider Keith Basso (1996) on...
the storied Western Apache landscape, Julie Cruikshank’s (2005) account of Tlingit and Tagish relations with glaciers in Canada’s Yukon Territory, and Hugh Raffles (2002) on Amazonians’ floodplain vocabularies. Mari-sol de la Cadena’s (2015) reflections on an *apu* in the Peruvian Andes provide a vivid example of the latter. The reader emerges with a sense that an entity or area – a tree, flowing ice, a floodplain, a mountain – is ‘more than’ or ‘other than’ what it is in contemporary Euro-American, science-informed understanding and is composed as such by different kinds of relations (ibid.).

In the emerging field of the anthropology of river deltas, however, scholars have generally taken it for granted that a protruded area at the end of a muddy river is in fact a delta. While the authors of two programmatic statements seek to capture the different ways in which inhabitants engage with the amphibiousness of ‘delta life’ (Krause 2017) or ‘delta ontologies’ (Morita and Jensen 2017), the question of whether these areas may be something other than a delta is foreclosed in their discussions. In my own research about conflicting conservation and development agendas along the Ukrainian Danube, I initially reflected little on the givenness of ‘delta’ as the place I was studying. Even though I became aware early on that ‘delta’, the same word in Russian, did not feature prominently in how fishermen and gardeners in Vylkove refer to their surroundings, a point also noticed by scholars of the Romanian Danube (Van Assche, Bell and Teampau 2012), I still contextualized my ethnography as being in and about the Danube Delta. However, recent explicit efforts to sketch an anthropology of ‘delta life’ and to compare ‘delta ontologies’ made me consider the consequences of this habit of mine and others.

This chapter undertakes a redescription of the Danube Delta in order to make a case for displacing ‘delta’ in an anthropology of deltas, and contributes to this book’s aim to ‘avoid treating the delta as a geographical container, integrated landscape and land-management category’ (Krause and Harris, introduction to this volume). It draws inspiration from Marilyn Strathern’s reflections on writing and comparison (1999, 2004) and from Ashley Lebner’s (2017a, 2017b) reading of her work. Displacing ‘delta’ means beginning with questions such as when, for what purposes, for whom, and through what relations the protruded areas at rivers’ ends become deltas rather than assuming a priori that they are deltas. The purpose of redescribing and displacing ‘delta’ is not to say that it does not exist as a delta or to replace ‘delta’ with something else, but rather to extend what it can be, similarly to what Strathern does in displacing ‘society’ (Strathern 1996, 2001). First, I consider what is obscured if we do not take this approach by reflecting on my own and others’ research. Second, I draw on historical and ethnographic research to sketch some ways in
which the zone between the Danube and the Black Sea, long characterized on maps as ‘the mouths’ and ‘channels’ of the Danube, became a delta as modern state-building intensified in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Third, I provide a brief description that foregrounds the reeds, silt and shallow water of the *plavni* (reed beds in Russian), which is where Vylkovchany begin when they talk about where and how they live. Through this portrait, I hope to show that although ‘the Danube Delta’ has gradually become the dominant way of apprehending this place, it is still not the primary way in which many people who engage its fluctuating milieus most intimately think about or relate to them in their daily lives.

**Anthropology of river deltas**

The study of river deltas as such is typically associated with the physical sciences, particularly hydrology and geology. Deltas are said to stand out from other environments due to the degree to which ‘geomorphological, hydrological and pedological features are . . . interrelated’ (Verstappen 1964: 4). As the definition cited in the epigraph indicates, geologists define deltas as the outcome of basin-level processes of sediment movement and deposition that produce an alluvial plain. It is the nature of the depositional processes, particularly progradation, that distinguishes deltas from estuaries – which also occur at river mouths (Hori and Saito 2007: 77). While Ancient Greek geographers coined the term ‘delta’, and nineteenth-century geologists revived the study of them as a landform, modern geomorphological knowledge about deltas – including in a global comparative frame – expanded rapidly from the 1950s (Bhattacharya 2006: 238).

While anthropological research in and about river deltas is not new, the project of explicitly taking ‘the delta’ as an object/topic of anthropological study is of recent origin (Krause and Harris, introduction to this volume). An anthropologist may refer to a delta (e.g. that of the Danube) in order to locate the reader. In such studies, the focus might be more on a practice related only peripherally to the specificity of the environment (e.g. Naumescu 2016 on Russian Old Believers in the Danube Delta). It may also be about so-called environmental aspects of life not exclusively related to deltas (e.g. Muehlmann 2012 on fishing in the Colorado Delta; or Barnes 2014 on irrigation infrastructure), or conflicts surrounding competing development and wetland-conservation agendas (e.g. Richardson 2015a; Scaramelli 2018). By contrast, an anthropology of river deltas creates a field of inquiry that focuses on characterizing and comparing the specificity of social life and its entanglement with non-human matter in such
places (Krause and Harris, introduction to this volume). A major factor in the emergence of an explicit anthropology of river deltas is climate change (Krause 2017; Morita and Jensen 2017). These areas have come into view on account of their vulnerability to inundation due to rising seas and more intense flooding (Krause 2017; Morita and Jensen 2017). Anthropologists (and other scholars) are posing questions not only about how delta inhabitants are being impacted by these changes, but also about what lessons delta inhabitants past and present might have for living with water and wetness more generally. While dealing with climate change is not always the focus in an anthropology of river deltas, it is central to the two important programmatic pieces discussed here.

My own research has been more a study in than about a river delta. It did not seek to elaborate a field of comparison for ‘delta life’ or ‘delta ontologies’. It considered the ways in which expanding environmental regulation and the creation of the Danube Biosphere Reserve have affected and been limited by the river’s fluid yet muddy milieus and residents’ fishing, gardening and pasturing-related livelihoods. This area near Vylkove was particularly interesting because Russian Old Believers and Ukrainian Zaporizhian Cossacks fleeing persecution by the Russian state were attracted to settle in the area by its rich fishing stocks just as the newest lobe of the delta began to form (Prigarin 2010, 2015).1 It is also interesting because of its location in relation to different states and to changing international boundaries and the conflicts that have erupted as a result, most recently in the early 2000s when Romania and the EU contested the Ukrainian government’s decision to dredge a shipping channel in its part of the delta (Richardson 2016). As such, my project was in conversation with research on conservation conflicts in transboundary areas and rivers more generally.

One of my aims was to describe how long-term inhabitants of Vylkove engage and think about their surroundings, and I thus left open the possibility that ‘delta’ might not be as significant for them as for scientists. I knew that Vylkovchany have a rich vocabulary for talking about recurring physical features along river branches, such as girlo, gradina, yerik, zhelobok, zaton, saga, kanal, kut, pereboi, tonia, shpil (Silantieva-Skorobogatova 1996: 156), similarly to the river dwellers Hugh Raffles (2002) describes. However, I noticed early in my fieldwork in the autumn of 2009 that Vylkovchany began conversations about gardening, fishing and pasturing with plavni. In my first interview with Nikolai Izotov, who became an important teacher and friend, he began: ‘I was born on an island along Ankundinov Branch . . . My grandparents dug these lands up from the plavni . . . The islands were embanked as people extended their plots. Beyond the strip of gardens there is an ocean of plavni, an ocean of

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rushes [kamysh] and reeds [trasnik]’. Over the next decade, on several occasions I witnessed men and women usually sixty years of age or older – but sometimes their grandchildren – refer to themselves or other residents as ‘people of the plavni’. However, I have described my work as being about and in ‘Ukraine’s Danube Delta’ to situate my work in a transboundary context shaped by hydrological and ecological connections and to signal on which side of the international and EU border I research. In locating Vylkove and my research ‘in the Danube Delta’, I inscribed – as context – the zoomed-out cartographic perspective adopted by looking at Vylkove on a map, similar to that found in other contemporary journalistic, scientific and historical texts. This move effaces the ways in which various people have conceptualized and engaged with the area in both the present and the past.

What is ‘the delta’ as an object of anthropological research and comparison? The two papers discussed here take quite different approaches. Krause’s paper identifies deltas’ distinguishing features as the ‘ever-changing interplay of land and water as a result of flooding, draining, drying and irrigating, sinking, silting, sedimentation, channelling, erosion and reclamation’ (Krause 2017: 403). These socio-material characteristics call for an ‘amphibious anthropology’ which pivots around hydro-sociality – that is, the deep entanglement of water in social life (ibid.). More specifically, according to Krause, anthropological research on delta life should attend to volatility, shifting relations between wet and dry, and rhythm – particularly cyclicity and fluctuation (ibid.: 405–7). This approach stresses that what river delta inhabitants have in common are certain predicaments generated by rivers’ geomorphological and hydrological characteristics. The anthropologist can thus compare similarities and differences in how people respond to these environments, and the environments to people.

Morita and Jensen meanwhile set out to compare Western and Southeast Asian delta ontologies in Thailand’s Chao Phraya Delta. Situated at the interface of anthropology and science and technology studies, their paper suggests that delta ontologies can be characterized by describing the cosmologies that inform them and the infrastructural transformations to which they give rise (2017: 118). The ‘cosmological orientation’ shaping ‘Western delta ontologies’ is derived from the Western science of geomorphology and land reclamation practices in which deltas are the manifestation of rivers’ land-generating capacities. By contrast, they suggest, the cosmological orientation shaping Southeast Asian deltas is derived from galactic polities which ‘conceive of deltas as extensions of the sea into the land’ (ibid.) that connected ‘inter-Asian trade networks’ (ibid.: 122). These overlapping ontologies – one terrestrial (Western) and one amphibious
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(Southeast Asian) become accessible to the researchers through excavating infrastructural histories. In the case of the Chao Phraya Delta, a massive 2011 flood brought the existence of older amphibious infrastructures associated with the Southeast Asian delta ontology into view for broader publics (including Morita and Jensen).

While these scholars’ work is very productive for thinking about people’s relations with river deltas, they inadvertently assume a priori that these places are self-evidently deltas. This runs counter to their theoretical orientations, which in different ways seek to avoid taking reality-as-posted-by-scientists as given. It is difficult to avoid naturalizing the earth’s physical features even when employing the critical tools of science studies and political ecology. However, the absence of reflection about this means that their accounts are haunted by an implicit naturalism (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Strathern 2017) and by its counterpart, what Ashley Lebner has perceptively called ‘society thinking’ – that is, the conceptual pairing of ‘society and individual’ whose displacement is central to Marilyn Strathern’s work (Lebner 2017a). This creates a few problems in their accounts. First, it forecloses avenues for exploring how these places actually came to be deltas – not in geomorphological terms, but taking into account how people came to relate to them as deltas. Second, while it is possible to apprehend deltaic multiplicity (Morita 2016) – that is, the way different ‘versions’ of a delta overlap, conflict and coexist (cf. Mol 2002) – it is not possible to capture how the area under discussion might not (only) be a delta (de la Cadena 2015). Third, it can lead to problems in making comparisons among deltas because anthropologists assume they are talking about the same kind of entity when in fact the entity may not be a delta, or not only a delta.

Both articles begin by referring to Western geomorphological definitions of what a delta is. The first line of Morita and Jensen’s article refers to a delta as ‘a landform shaped by silt deposited by a river at its estuary’ (2017: 118). This statement is not qualified as arising out of a particular knowledge tradition but asserts the existence of deltas as entities that are a self-evident given in the world: a landform generated by a river. While the second sentence of the article provides a definition from Western science that is largely the same, it does not qualify the first statement as a particular way of apprehending – or, in STS parlance, enacting – a feature of the earth. By asserting that deltas simply exist, the possibility of seeing the place as something else is foreclosed. In Jensen and Morita’s paper, this leads them to assume that deltas existed as such for premodern Southeast Asians.

However, if inhabitants of the galactic polities saw the areas at the ends of muddy rivers as extensions of the sea into the land, are such areas in fact
deltas in this cosmology if a delta is by definition a landform that exists when imagined from above? Are they a rather different kind of entity – perhaps a seaform – or even a series of entities that relate to river and sea differently than a delta does? It is difficult to tell because no terms from Southeast Asian languages are mentioned and I am not a Southeast Asia specialist. Some scholars they cite about the galactic polity (Tambiah 1977) or port polity (Kathirithamby-Wells 1990; Laarhoven 1990) refer to these areas as river mouths rather than deltas. ‘River mouth’ is also a technical term but it does not seem to have an author in the same way that ‘delta’ does. Mouth, in contrast to delta, can be apprehended from the side rather than looking down ‘from above’, and also directs the thinker/viewer to river channels and passageways. Passageways for navigation in turn appear to have been more of a concern for port polities in the lower parts of rivers similarly to the way they were in the Danube. Laarhoven hints at other ways of knowing and relating to these areas in his discussion of the premodern port polity Magindanao in what is today the Philippines. The root word ‘Danao’ means people who settled around the lake – in this case, the floodplain in the lower reaches of the river. Hence my questions: in the Chao Phraya, do we have two examples of the same entity (delta), or two (or more) different kinds of entity (a delta and something else)? Is talking in terms of entities the right place to start?

This takes us to the related issues of comparison, context and scale that arise in the creation of anthropological knowledge. In her book Partial Connections (2004), Marilyn Strathern exposed some of the problems that Euro-American pluralist – modern – thought creates for doing comparison and for generating anthropological knowledge. The book addresses anthropologists’ struggles with complexity – the potential for questions and materials to proliferate and fragment – struggles that are produced, she argues, by the intellectual habit of changing the scale of observation or switching perspective (xiv). This habit arises out of ‘a modelling of nature that regards the world as composed of entities . . . whose characteristics are regarded as only ever partially described by analytic schema’ (ibid.). It is also connected with a particular notion of the relationship between society and the individual in which society is conceived as a whole ‘made up of individual parts’ (ibid.: 26) – that is, with ‘society thinking’ (Lebner 2017a) – which in turn manifests a particular scalar and hierarchical relationship in which the large (society) encompasses the small (individuals). Strathern also raises analogous points about the challenges that naturalism poses to biologists and anthropologists in apprehending and analysing relations (2017: 17).

The difficulties that this creates for cross-cultural comparison are addressed most vividly in Strathern’s discussion of Hays’ comparative study.
of relation between the flute complex and ideas of growth, fertility and male power in Highlands societies of Papua New Guinea (2004: 72–76). Strathern argues that Hays’ use of the flute complex as a substrate or a regional culture creates a scale against which he plots particular examples, including cases where it is absent. However, she demonstrates how the themes common to the different usages are not a context or level independent of local use because the flute complex ‘never exists in generic form, only a multiplicity of specific ones’ (ibid.: 73). While specific incidences do not actually fit Hays’ plotting (e.g. where flutes are not a male-female pair but a female-female pair), they are not allowed to affect the author’s assumption that the male-female difference is significant (ibid.). Summing up, she writes: ‘And what is a flute? No external criteria can escape contamination by local meanings – whether we regard it as a length of bamboo, a vessel, a sound-making instrument, an artefact with mystical power or as a male or female appendage. Its attributes can no more be counted than we can perceive “it” as a single entity set apart from the purposes for which it is made’ (ibid.: 75). Scale and context (which appear as synonyms at one point in Strathern’s analysis – see p. 75 bottom paragraph) are created by the anthropologist in the act of comparing ostensibly similar objects, as ‘there is no automatic scale to be generated from such units’ (ibid.).

In these two articles on the anthropology of river deltas, the scale of comparison is global. Initially this scale was generated by engineering expertise related to irrigation and land reclamation that travelled in the Age of Imperialism, as in the case with the Chao Phraya (Morita and Jensen 2017). The current anthropological interest in comparing deltas arises out of climate change’s planetary dimensions along with the travels of expertise about climate change’s impacts on deltas (see Zegwaard 2016). In Morita and Jensen’s article, there are also regional contexts – Western and Southeast Asian – whose cosmologies give rise to (and appear to encompass) particular ‘delta ontologies’. However, if anthropologists are the ones who create context and scales in their work, as Strathern suggests, the authors need to make explicit the prior knowledge on which this is based. These important contributions miss one step in identifying the muddy areas where rivers meet the sea as entities to compare. While Krause (2017) considers how inhabitants may understand water or sediments differently, he does not pose questions about how these areas became known as deltas or about the relations that might compose these areas as something more than or other than deltas to river dwellers. While Jensen and Morita instructively identify how different ways of conceiving and engaging with muddy areas where river and sea meet produce very different landscapes,
they do not explain why we should assume the area they describe has been a delta in premoedern times.

If comparison reinstates naturalism and ‘society thinking’, so too does my habit of situating research ‘in the Danube Delta’. Rereading Eric Hirsch’s introduction to the Anthropology of Landscape (1995) indicates that this is a continuation of British social anthropologists’ convention of using landscape as a contextualizing device to bring their study into focus from an objective point of view. I was reminded of this text by Strathern’s comment in Property, Substance and Effect about how certain habits in Euro-American thought may have led to a focus on ceremonial exchange in Melanesia, thereby blocking anthropological knowledge: ‘Was it because as an Euro-American I have been trained to equate knowledge with seeing, when what is seen is the world at large? I do not see a person but a person in a cultural context, not a figure but a figure in a landscape [emphasis added] . . . not a gift but economics?’ (1999: 257). Seeing a ‘figure in a landscape’ suggests that ‘society thinking’ haunts environmental anthropologists in the very act of locating their work, even those who seek to evade nature/society dualisms by treating a delta as a cyborg or hybrid (e.g. Morita 2016). In still treating a landform as self-evidently a delta even as they study its multiplicity, they leave naturalism and aspects of ‘society thinking’ intact, which perpetuates the pluralistic thinking some environmental anthropologists seek to avoid. While avoiding naturalism entirely may be impossible, writing about landforms specified by modern sciences requires some reflection on the implications of its persistence in our work (e.g. Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Strathern 2017).

In the remainder of this chapter, I try to displace ‘delta’ – that is, take a small step towards redescribing the Danube Delta without assuming it is a priori a delta. I approach the area at the end of the Danube in two ways. First, I reread and redescribe the history of key ways in which the area has been named, represented and engaged. I show how ‘the Danube and its mouths’ became ‘the Danube Delta’ in conjunction with modern state-building processes. In contrast to ‘delta’ and its view from above, the older notion (now encompassed by ‘delta’) arises from and enables a horizontal relationship with the places that compose it. This more horizontal view can be a starting point for the second way I displace ‘delta’. I begin my description where Vylkovchany do – with their relations with plavni – and then consider the relations that bring ‘delta’ into their daily lives. In the final section, I reflect again on the hazards of using ‘ontology’ in characterizing something like a delta because of the way in which it can lead the analyst to unreflexively ‘hover above’ delta inhabitants, thereby reinstating ‘society thinking’ and its correlate, the viewpoint of the modern state (Lebner 2017b).
The Danube and its mouths

In discussing the origin of the term ‘delta’, scientific texts sometimes mention Herodotus’s use of the term in the fifth century to describe the triangular-shaped landform at the end of the Nile (e.g. Bhattacharya 2006: 238). However, in a 1966 article Francis Celoria (cited in Morita and Jensen 2017) argued that in fact ‘delta’ was first used as a concept by Onesicritus, a Cynic philosopher and sea captain who travelled with Alexander of Macedon (356–323 BCE) to the mouth of the Indus and compared it to the Nile (Celoria 1966: 387). Celoria gleans this from the Greek geographer Strabo who, writing three centuries after these voyages, states that Onesicritus ‘calls the island [at the mouth of the Indus] a delta’. Prior to using ‘delta’, Greek writers referred to the area of the Nile in terms of ‘outflows’ or the ‘silty mouths of the Nile’ or the ‘triangular Nilotic land’ (Celoria 1966: 386). The term ‘delta’ – coined because of the resemblance between the Greek letter and the Nile’s landform – eventually became a new concept directing attention to a river’s land-generating capacity. This contrasts with the arguably more specific term ‘mouth’, which is about flows and channels.

While ‘delta’ may have transformed from a place name to a concept through travel and comparison (Celoria 1966; Morita and Jensen 2017), it was not uniformly adopted as a name for such landforms in all places, even those settled by Greeks. Indeed, Celoria (1966: 385) remarks that the first use in English dates from the late 1800s. Several remarkable environmental histories of river deltas have appeared in recent years (e.g. Biggs 2010; Morris 2012). For example, Biggs’ book Quagmire offers a riveting account of French, American and Vietnamese projects to civilize, modernize and develop the muddy Mekong ‘Delta’ through various infrastructural and administrative projects. He helpfully alerts readers to the role of cartography and aerial photography in how the lower Mekong came to be represented as a delta (Biggs 2010: 12) and the ‘bird’s-eye view’ it afforded administrators. Biggs himself tends to take this perspective too in using the term delta throughout his book and in his focus on administrators. Nevertheless, he alerts us to the possibility of other ways of conceiving of and engaging with the area from the point of view of Vietnamese when he describes how it is called ‘Nine Dragons’ and how river dwellers’ embodied engagements offer other insights (ibid.: 13).

The area now known as ‘the Danube Delta’ was referred to as the mouths of the Istros in antiquity and as the mouths of the Danube in treaties and travel writing throughout the nineteenth century (Focas 1987: 30). Since Greek colonization, the mouths of the Danube/Istros have been regarded as significant for transportation and trade routes (ibid.: 1). How-
ever, it was only in the nineteenth century that the Danube River as a whole came to be regarded as a desirable medium- and long-range trade route and infrastructured in such ways as to materialize this (Ardeleanu 2014: 17). This was due to treacherous physical terrain along the river and at its mouths, and to the political and economic relations between adjacent territories that grew around them (ibid.). Thus, the Upper Danube – the German Danube – was connected to the Rhine and northern Italy; the Middle Danube, the Austrian and Hungarian – the Danube ‘that flowed’ – was connected by several tributaries and roads to the Adriatic Sea; and the Lower Danube, the Ottoman and Romanian (the latter from 1878), was accessible through seagoing ships and connected to the Black Sea juridically, politically and economically (ibid.).

Greeks settled on the coast at the mouths of the Danube between 600 and 300 BCE, once technology enabled them to pass through the Bosporus (Focas 1987: 11). Eventually they also settled along the river branches, and some of the sites chosen remain settlements today. The Greek colonies functioned as city-states; economic life was based on fishing and trade with the interior, across the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean. Ancient Greek writers identified six mouths, named (from south to north) Hiron (holy or sacred), Naracum (narrow), Calon (beautiful), Pseudo (fake), Boreo (northern) and Psilon (empty, deserted) (Constantinescu 2015: 156). The name Istros applied to the river’s lower stretch, beyond which the Greeks did not venture. When the mouths of the River Istros became part of the Roman Empire, the Istrs persisted as the name for the lower part of the river even after the water body was recognized as a single river called Danubius.4

For a few hundred years, control over the area shifted among the Byzantine Empire, Rus’ and the Bulgarian Empire (Barford 2001: 229; Subtelny 1988: 31). The Lower Danube appears in schematic form on the Medieval mappi mundi and on thirteenth-century Portolan Charts (Constantinescu 2015: 156). In the fourteenth century, the city-states of Venice and Genoa controlled ports and trade on the Lower Danube. The contemporary names of the branches at the mouth were acquired over time under Byzantine rule. Today the river splits into the Kilia and Tulcea branches at the Izmail fork. The Tulcea Branch (now Romania) then breaks into the Sulina and Sf. Gheorghe channels. The Kilia Branch (Ukraine) splits and reunites twice before splitting into three main branches, Bilhorod, Ochakiv and Starostambul, some of which subdivide yet again.

From 1453 until 1699, the area was part of the Ottoman Empire. From 1700 until the end of the Second World War, the area became a zone of competition and confrontation among the Ottoman, Austrian and Russian Empires and later Britain, France and Romania as they sought to protect commercial and trade interests. The strategic and commercial significance
of the lower part of the Danube for transcontinental trade is highlighted by Karl Marx’s statement, ‘if you hold the outlets of the Danube River you hold the Danube and with it the highway to Europe’ (in Focas 1987: 6), and the statement by the famous nineteenth-century publicist David Urquhart that ‘the Lower Danube may be considered a continuation of the Straits of Bosporus and Dardanelles’ (ibid.). Both highlight the great powers’ interest in controlling the area for its waterways rather than as potentially reclaimed land. The expanded competition among empires and states was accompanied by the production of new kinds of maps. One from 1771 drawn by Russian naval officers is interesting not only because of the way in which a contemporary historical geographer describes it as ‘the first to offer a unitary image of the Danube Delta’ (Constantinescu 2015: 167), but also because ‘Danube Delta’ does not appear on the map. Rather, what one can read on the map is ‘A description of the small branches and bays’, while on the back it reads ‘Donau-monden 1771. Sintz 1849 Russisch grondegebied’ (Danube-mouths 1771. Since 1849 Russian territory) (ibid.).

The Crimean War of 1853–56 was a critical event in the life of the Danube because of the infrastructural interventions that were undertaken to clear the bar at its Sulina mouth in order to facilitate the river’s internationalization (Gatejel 2018). These events and projects in turn reveal officials’, engineers’ and merchants’ concern with channels and their relative indifference towards the areas in between, evidence for which can be found in the maps and surveys produced (Constantinescu 2015: 171). The war pitted the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France and Sardinia against Russia. While the causes were complex, one factor contributing to the tension leading to the conflict had to do with Russians’ failure to keep the Sulina channel clear of sediment, which impeded trade and commerce (Focas 1987: 210; Gatejel 2018: 933). The Danube’s mouths were long renowned for their difficult terrain. For example, a document from the Ottoman Financial Department from 1565 about siltation in the Danube branches reads (footnotes removed):

Below Tulcea the Danube becomes separated and one of its courses advances into the St. George (Hizir Ilyas) Branch (bogaz, lit. ‘throat’) and one of its courses advances into the Sulina (Süline) Branch and one of its courses advances into the Liqo Branch. For that reason [there] the Danube becomes shallow and [thus] they [i.e. the crews] empty half of the loads of some of the ships [that] are to be provisioning Istanbul and empty the entire loads of the other ships and [thereby the ships are able to] pass [the shallows]. [Meanwhile,] as [the crews] with their arms and equipment watch over the loads that they unloaded [onto the shore], their ships are [often] raided. Because [of this] so much property has been lost and their distress has become certain. (Quoted in Ostapchuk n.d.)

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Fast-forward three hundred years to 30 March 1850, when we can read what the English Vice-Consul Lloyd wrote regarding the Sulina mouth. Sulina became a major port after the 1829 Treaty of Adrianople which ended a war between Russia and the Ottomans and established Russian control over the mouths of the Danube. Lloyd wrote: ‘it is not in the interests of any parties, either the local authorities or the inhabitants of Sulina, that the obstacles of navigation be removed’ (in Focas 1987: 181). This was followed by a statement from the British Foreign Secretary calling for a conference ‘of the interested states to discuss ways of financing an extensive project for deepening the bar’, which was subsequently rejected by Russia because it was not compatible with its sovereignty (ibid.: 196).

The Treaty of Paris of 1856, which ended the Crimean War, sought to address the problem of navigation ‘at the Mouths of the Danube’ – a term similar to the one used in antiquity and on maps that had appeared since then – and returned the mouth region to the Ottoman Empire. It also designated the Danube an international river and established the Danube European Commission to handle issues pertaining to its administration (Gatejel 2018). Among other things, the Commission was ‘charged to designate and to cause to be executed the Works necessary below Isatcha, to clear the Mouths of the Danube, as well as neighbouring parts of the Sea, from the sands and other impediments which obstruct them in order to put that part of the River and the said parts of the Sea in the best possible state for Navigation’ (Article 16, Treaty of Paris).

While mid-nineteenth-century international legal documents and popular writing refer to the Danube and its mouths, a 1956 hydrographic map produced for the Commission by English naval officer Captain Thomas Abel Spratt is called ‘The Delta of the Danube’. The first published material of English engineer Charles Hartley (who went on to design infrastructure at the Sulina mouth) also describes the area as the Danube Delta (Hartley 1862). English engineers in Hartley’s time (1825–1915) trained through apprenticeship (in contrast to formal engineering colleges in France). Ideally this would involve special tutoring in ‘mathematics, natural philosophy, land surveying and levelling, drawing, chemistry, mineralogy, geology, strength of materials, mechanical motions, [and] the principles of hydraulics’, along with ‘French and German’ (in Hartley 1989: 16). He would therefore have been acquainted with newly emerging specialist knowledge from English geologist Charles Lyell, Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt, and others characterizing and categorizing deltas as types of river mouths (see Burt et al. 2008: 827–29; Samoilov 1952: 8–15). However, while the English engineer’s maps provided accurate measurements of the river’s main arms, they did not do so for adjacent territory,
and the system of lakes in between the main waterways is almost absent (Constantinescu 2015: 173).

Interest in what lay between the branches at the Danube’s mouth began to increase after Romania gained de facto independence in 1878 at the Congress of Berlin. This suggests that the emergence of ‘delta’ as a way of designating the area is connected with the expansion of modern state administration, with its modern cartographic perspective positing a ‘view from nowhere’. This followed the Russo-Turkic War of 1877–78, which also enabled Russia to regain access to the Danube via the Kilia Branch. With Romania’s acquisition of statehood, scientists and administrators began to make use of new mapping techniques for generating knowledge about what lay between the branches (Constantinescu and Tanasescu 2018: 73). Like other states at the time, the authorities invested extensive resources into producing detailed maps of different kinds of territories under their jurisdiction to make populations and natural resources legible for governing (Biggs 2010; Scott 1998; Seegel 2012). The Romanian army’s Institute for Cartography produced maps of the entire Lower Danube valley between 1880 and 1899 (Constantinescu et al. 2015: 263). The map of the coast produced by the Romanian army in 1899 stressed ‘the representation of lakes and streams with designations mentioned in Romanian’ in the area (Constantinescu 2015: 173) and marked a shift from an ‘island approach’ (one that portrays the areas between the branches in a homogeneous way as if they were solid ground) that persisted even in Charles Hartley’s detailed maps.

Romanian engineer Gheorghe Vidrascu further expanded on this work during topographical research in 1909–11, which culminated in the first detailed (accurate) map of the Romanian part of the delta that was also the first to be explicitly called ‘A Hydrographic Map of the Danube Delta’ (Constantinescu 2015: 176–77). This involved the use of new methods including the creation of a geodesic system in order to provide a more comprehensive survey of the area. Vidrascu himself claimed: ‘until the last few years, the Danube Delta was not known from a scientific perspective’ (ibid.: 176). His colleague and collaborator, polymath Grigore Antipa, used these maps and his own research to elaborate plans for the development of fisheries and limited land reclamation for animal husbandry (Constantinescu et al. 2015: 268). These maps were part of a process of making territorial resources visible in the context of building a modern Romanian state.

Nevertheless, full-fledged embankments and land reclamation of the kind associated with the Western (or, more accurately, Dutch) delta model that Jensen and Morita describe were undertaken in the Romanian and Soviet parts of the delta only after the Second World War (Constantinescu...
et al. 2015: 272; Goriup and Goriup 2015). In what eventually became the Netherlands, land reclamation efforts began in the tenth century, involving the construction of drainage canals and later dikes (Lambert 1971: 108; TeBrake 1985: 14). In subsequent centuries, the Dutch began to be commissioned to drain other areas of Europe (Blackbourn 2006; Renes 2005). In the Romanian Danube, several thousand hectares of the floodplain were reclaimed in the stretch of the river above the delta between 1904 and 1906 (Constantinescu et al. 2015: 272). This expanded to 23,070 in 1928 and 101,100 in 1962, with additional areas being reclaimed until 1991. Although some polderizing took place in the delta itself in order to stimulate reed growth for paper production, in 1980 only 43,400 of 440,000 hectares of the area of the Romanian Delta had been polderized (Schultz 2015: 310). The vastly greater part of the delta remained unmodified by extensive infrastructural development and sparsely populated. However, on a visit to the Netherlands in the late 1960s, Nicolae Ceausescu viewed the Rhine Delta from the air and decided that the Romanian Delta should be developed in a similar way (ibid.: 304). The goal was to reclaim some 100,000 hectares of land in the delta itself (ibid.: 307). These plans, however, remained largely unrealized, in part due to the efforts of the Dutch experts commissioned to help with the project, who stalled it by writing negative reports about the soil’s unsuitability (ibid.: 310, 317).

In the late twentieth century, global conservation regimes became significant in the configuration of relations that make the area a delta. Past failure to implement massive land reclamation projects meant that the mouths of the Danube acquired new significance as a delta for the area’s relatively unmodified condition and wetland ecologies when compared to similar areas elsewhere in the world. ‘Wetland’ was institutionalized globally as a way of valuing heterogeneous marshy areas with the holding of the Ramsar Convention in 1971 (Matthews 1993: 1; Scaramelli 2018: 408, 410–12). Since the 1990s, parts of the Romanian and Ukrainian Danube Deltas have been officially designated Ramsar Wetlands of International Significance, which has helped to justify the establishment of separate UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and a joint Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. Part of the Romanian Delta has also been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site (Van Assche, Bell and Teampau 2012).

In the early 2000s, the delta-as-internationally-important-wetland contributed to the replaying of nineteenth-century conflicts over access to the Danube for shipping (Richardson 2016). In 2003, the Ukrainian government decided to dredge a shipping channel in its part of the delta in order to break the Romanian monopoly and bypass its tariffs. European states aligned with their soon-to-be new member, Romania, and invoked new conventions pertaining to wildlife conservation and environmental
protection to sanction Ukraine (Richardson 2015a). This time, however, the name given to the area was not ‘the mouths of the Danube’. Rather, the conflict is known in international law circles as the ‘Danube Delta Conflict’ (Koyano 2009).

People of the plavni

Here I foreground the plavni in an account of Vylkovchany’s fluvial relations with the Danube’s Kilia Branch to demonstrate a second way in which ‘delta’ can be displaced. In such an account, ‘delta’ does not disappear entirely. Rather it enters through people’s relations with particular beings, substances, knowledges and administrative structures, which participate in conjuring the delta as an administrative, hydrological or ecological unit. This dovetails in part with other contributors who begin their chapters with ‘movements of materials, animals and people’ (Krause and Harris, introduction to this volume) rather than ‘a delta’ per se (e.g. Horisberger on tides, shrimp and croa; Simon on molluscs, mangroves and sandbanks; and Scaramelli on water buffaloes, marshes, rice fields and gardens) and describe how people’s engagements in waiting and tricking, gleaning, and planting and hoeing, respectively, create distinct, more-than-human socialities.

The Lower Danube’s multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-state history manifests itself in the words used to describe the sometimes wet, sometimes dry reedy areas along its channels. Roughly half of the entire area now classified as the Danube Delta (220,000 of 440,000 hectares) consists of different kinds of reed beds (Hanganu and Doroftei 2015: 71). The dominant species of reed is the cosmopolitan Phragmites australis, which since the late 1990s has been harvested as thatch and exported to Germany and the Netherlands. These reeds reach a height of three to four metres on average and grow in dense stands (Schneider 2015: 51). The Russian word plavni is translated into English as reed marsh, reed beds, and sometimes wetlands (cf. Olenenko 2019), though the more common scientific Russian word for wetland is vodobolotnye ugodiia, the literal English translation of which could be water-saturated grounds. Plavni is a plural noun formed from plav, which in its verb form plavit’ means to float. Though it refers to reeds when used with reference to the Danube and the Dniro (ibid.), the word itself does not contain the word reed, trasnik, or rush, kamysh, Vylkovchany’s most common words for plavni vegetation. Plavni does not have the negative connotations of bolota, which can also be translated as marsh or swamp and is similar to the word balta used by Romanian speak-
ers across the border, many of whom are also Russian Old Believers and Ukrainians (Van Assche, Bell and Teampau 2012: 171).

A type of floating fen called *plaur* in Romanian (also from the Slavic root to float) and *splavini* in Russian is one of the most distinctive kinds of reed marshes for which the Danube is famous. They were brought to the attention of English-speaking audiences in the early twentieth century by English ecologist Marietta Pallis (Cameron and Matless 2003). There are some discrepancies in how Russian and Romanian words are translated in English-language writing on the Danube. For example, some scientists write that *plaur* in Romanian translates as *plav* or *plavni* in Russian (e.g. Cameron and Matless 2003; Schneider 2015). However, botanists writing in Russian use *plavni* as the general word for reed beds and *splavini* as the more specific term for floating reed marsh (see Zaitsev and Prokopenko 1989: 15). Meanwhile, Vylkovchany refer to the floating reed marsh (*splavini*) with the Romanian term *plaur*. *Plaur* are quite rare and are primarily found in the lakes close to the coast more frequently in the Romanian part than the Ukrainian one. The areas Vylkovchany refer to as *plavni* can range from aquatic spaces that are permanently inundated, to natural levees along branches that are above water except in exceptional circumstances.

Vylkovchany’s efforts to clarify their rights to fish and land have left documentary traces that reveal how they apprehended and related to the river in the mid-nineteenth century as the concept of ‘delta’ came into more frequent use. Their efforts have arisen out of and been complicated by changing borders and governments (Ardeleanu 2017). From 1829 to 1856, Vilkovo was part of the Russian Empire. From the end of the Crimean War in 1856 until 1878, the town was once again ruled by the Ottoman Empire (more specifically the Moldovan Principality), after which it was returned to Russia. While changing borders led some townspeople to migrate from one bank or branch to another, those who stayed put saw their subjecthood and citizenship change multiple times as state boundaries were redrawn.

Articles by local historian and ethnographer Georgii Bakhtalovskii titled ‘Posad Vilkovo’, which appeared in Russian over several issues of a journal during 1881–82 published in Kisheniev, are a particularly rich source of information about the town. In the 1840s – prior to the Crimean War – Vilkovo Society (*Obshchestvo*) sought to have the town designated as *posad* (a type of town) in order to give residents the higher status of urban commoners in the Russian Empire’s estate system. One of the goals was to strengthen residents’ access to water and fishing rights on account of the absence of cultivable land. Their 1843 application read:
Land belonging to Vilkovo . . . is unsuitable for growing grain and other livelihood needs. Located between the Danube and the Sea and covered entirely with plavni, water, kamysh (rushes) and kuchugury (sandy hills) . . . this land is not suitable for [allocating as] plots (uchastki). (Bakhtalovskii 1881: 499)

While the town was given posad status, river access and fishing rights were not clarified, and therefore Vilkovchani submitted the following complaint in winter 1845:

... [the Senate] department confirmed that they would pass a resolution regarding the request of the Posad of Vilkovo to allocate rights to fish on the banks of the Danube . . . so that residents of Vilkovo, who have from a long time ago fished in the mouths of the Danube, for whom this is the only means of sustenance, and who, because they were completely familiar with the waters and banks of the Danube River, were needed during the last war with the Turks (1828–9) to transport our troops across this river, and in the current times are used to transport border guards to the islands and other places . . . without compensation . . . (Bakhtalovskii 1881: 504–5)

In these passages (and others), the area around Vilkovo is described as the Kilia Danube, the mouths (ustiia), branches (girla, protoki), banks (berega), waters (vody), reed beds (plavni) and islands (ostrovy) of the Danube, and also as dunes (nasipy piska, or kuchugury in local parlance). Bakhtalovskii himself did not use the term ‘delta’ in these articles. Thus, in contrast to ethnographers and historians writing 150 years later (e.g. Ardeleanu 2017; Prigarin 2015; Richardson 2015b; Van Assche, Bell and Teampau 2012), he likely saw himself as doing research about the Danube and its mouths of but not in the Danube Delta.

Residents of Vylkove and other settlements along the Danube’s branches dealt with changing international borders and state regimes during the twentieth century too. While state boundaries shifted again in 1918, 1939 and 1941, since 1944 the border between Romania and Soviet and independent Ukraine has run along the Kilia Branch, which means roughly 80 per cent of what is called the Danube Delta is in Romania and 20 per cent is in Ukraine. Under socialism, high modern embankment, land reclamation and irrigation projects were implemented (Goriup and Goriup 2015; Richardson 2016). Since 1990, both sides of the Kilia Danube have been subjected to expanding national and international environmental regulation. However, the two parts differ in how they are related administratively, culturally and ethnolinguistically to their respective states. The more sparsely populated Romanian part of the delta is a distinct administrative unit, which corresponds with the Romanian Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve’s boundaries. The Ukrainian delta is split among three administrative districts while the Danube Biosphere Reserve
covers just half of Ukrainian delta territories and has considerably less autonomy in making regulations than its Romanian counterpart (Fedorenko 2002). In contrast to Romania, where Old Believers are an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority, in southern Ukraine Old Believers are not a linguistic minority in the same way, for Russian is widespread in many areas of southern Ukraine (even if it does not have the status of official language) and remains a language in which scientific research about the area is published. One consequence of twentieth- and twenty-first-century state-building projects and border regimes is that Vylkovchany are more likely to talk about how their way of life differs from that of fellow Ukrainian citizens who live on ‘the steppe, land that has existed for eternity’ than of commonalities they share with residents of the Danube’s branches in Romania.

Contemporary Vylkovchany’s stories about their families, livelihoods and town emphasize the plavni as a place of settlement and refuge. Enlightenment land/water and culture/nature oppositions run through narratives of settlement. Paraskovia Mishurnova’s statement, ‘We conquered (otvoievali) this land from the sea and the plavni’, was one I heard from nearly everyone. ‘They dug, and dug and dug’ is how Nikolai Izotov described how his grandparents settled the plavni. Aksinia Selezneva, an Old Believer born in 1925, said, ‘We pave, and pave, and pave (mostim, mostim, mostim) . . . to keep raising land. That’s how people live here’. Residents describe the labour involved in transporting building materials, appliances and other heavy household goods to houses that can only be reached by boat, and the challenges if the water level is low. Therefore, they said, what distinguished the labour of living in the plavni was that there everything was done ‘by hand and by boat’ (Richardson 2015b). These conversations also emphasized how people’s relations with the plavni and the Danube were changing, leading to the siltation of Vylkove’s canals as part of a broader ‘terrestrialization’ process (Richardson 2018).

In stories beginning with persecution following Patriarch Nikon’s reforms of the Orthodox Church, Old Believers describe the plavni as a place that allowed them to hide and to live in a way that enabled them to maintain their faith. The plavni has remained a place of actual and potential refuge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One elderly couple described how they hid in the plavni from Soviet border guards in 1947 so that they could work on their garden to grow food and avoid starvation during the famine that raged at the time. The plavni also resurfaced as a place of refuge during the events of the Euromaidan and the beginning of war in Eastern Ukraine in June 2014. One friend said he would hide his son in the plavni if army recruiters came for him. Another friend described how some Vylkovchany had prevented Euromaidan activists from enter-
ing the town by threatening them with statements such as ‘We will chase you so far into the plavni that you will never find your way out’.

Since they arrived at the mouths of the Danube, people have cut reeds to use as construction material and for mats (Dushakova 2013), and in spring to feed goats and cattle. While tourists might see the marshy areas as beautiful sites of pristine wilderness, elderly women recalled the discomfort of wading in the cold, muddy water in early spring as they cut reeds for feed or other purposes. They recounted frightening incidents of being caught in a boat in treacherous waters far from home during a sudden change of weather because of a change in wind direction. They also point out how the interior lakes that form species-rich habitats now part of the Danube Biosphere Reserve (DBR) exist because their ancestors cleared passageways of mud and reeds at special angles to filter the silt and prevent its accumulation. They also tried to keep these lakes clear of plaur, rather than letting them proliferate as biologists prefer and current regulation requires. While people contrast the cultivated spaces of garden plots with the plavni beyond, the plavni is nevertheless an anthropogenic landscape that people have managed through clearing, cutting and burning.

Vylkovchany do become entangled with ‘a delta’ in everyday life in various ways. Here I consider two ways in which the DBR’s establishment in 1998 expanded their engagement with ‘a delta’: ecotourism and fishing. The history of nature conservation in this part of the delta dates from 1967, when a small protected area was established along the coast. In 1973 it was expanded once in response to the USSR’s signing of the Ramsar Convention (1971), a second time in 1981, the year that the Dunaiskii Plavni Nature Reserve (zapovednik) was founded, and a third time in 1998 when the Danube Biosphere Reserve came into existence. The value of Ukraine’s part of the delta – in particular the part known as the Kilia Delta – lies not only in its biodiversity, but also in its minimally modified geomorphology. This means scientists can observe the Danube’s geomorphological processes in action along with their corresponding ecological successions.

Nature tourism (ecotourism) has been promoted and developed alongside the DBR’s establishment and is an area where one does hear talk about ‘the delta’, including among Vylkovchany guides. Guides use ‘delta’ in their conversations with visitors in order to locate them in relation to the Danube River as a whole. They also refer to ‘the delta’ when they describe the area’s diverse flora and fauna and the DBR’s creation. Outside Vylkove, narratives about the pristine nature of the area, its abundant flora and fauna, and the exoticism of its residents’ lifeways have begun to multiply (Richardson 2018). Some guides – including local ones – omit references to residents’ stewardship of the environment in the picture they present to tourists.
While the DBR’s presence has helped make Vylkove attractive for tourists and enhance some townspeople’s incomes, in recent years its existence has led to complications in Vylkovchany’s ability to fish at the Danube’s mouths. For example, when key fishing grounds became part of the Reserve in 1967, an exception was made in the Reserve’s founding document to allow fishing to continue. However, an amendment to the Law on Protected Areas passed in 2010 clashed with the Law on Fisheries and created difficulties for Vylkovchany in accessing fishing grounds. Consequently, Reserve administrators have come to serve in practice as lawyers defending Vylkovchany’s fishing rights at the Danube’s mouths. For one court case, they translated Vylkovchany’s ecological knowledge and testimony into an expert statement written by an Academy of Sciences hydrobiologist. It argued that fishing ‘does not just take place in the delta’. Rather, over the past 350 years fishing has been what Reserve administrators call a ‘delta-forming factor’. What they meant was that the Kilia Delta would not have its existing mosaic quality, with channels and interior lakes supporting species-rich habitats, if fishermen had not been clearing away debris and reeds from these same channels and lakes. This is just one of many instances where Vylkovchany’s knowledge that is not explicitly about ‘the delta’ per se gets mobilized in ways that constitute the Danube delta as an object of administration.8

River delta (yet to be) displaced?

I began the chapter with a quote from a traveller to the Danube Delta that expresses the challenges of apprehending it – knowing that one is in a delta – without looking down on it from above. As someone who grew up near mountains, I found it challenging to orient myself on the flat, marshy areas at the mouths of the Kilia Danube. Only in recent years have I become better at getting my bearings after spending large amounts of time locating my boat trips and walks on a map. While the cartographic view of maps is not alien to Vylkovchany, the fishermen, gardeners and guides I have worked with did not really use them to orient themselves most of the time. But this abstract cartographic perspective – which appears to be embedded in the very concept of delta itself – can impede insight in an anthropology of river deltas if anthropologists fail to reflect on it explicitly.

To call for this kind of reflection is not really all that new in anthropological studies of the earth’s physical features. Julie Cruikshank and Marisol de la Cadena have provided exemplary accounts of the conceptual, interpersonal and ethical relations Indigenous peoples have with glaciers
and mountains that compose them as entities quite different from what they would be to modern Euro-Americans. These scholars’ dispositions can be carried into accounts of places such as the Danube where radical difference is not necessarily at stake. Superimposing ‘delta’ onto documents, maps and accounts that describe the area as the Danube and its mouths obscures important dimensions of how people’s relations with silt, reeds and water affect the forms the area takes and the lives lived there. It also lets naturalism seep into an analysis that intends to avoid or problematize it. Taking a cue from a special issue on ethnographies of naturalism (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012), we might ask how and why deltas have seemed self-evident and given in nature even to scholars trained to avoid doing this.

Morita and Jensen have described a figure–ground reversal in the Chao Phraya Delta as people changed their orientations from the canal (and water) to the street (and land) over time (2017: 128). Something similar seems to be at play in the Danube as it went from being ‘the Danube and its mouths’ to ‘the Danube Delta’. It became a delta with the emergence of the geological sciences in the nineteenth century and their use by state administrators (Romanian, Soviet) to grasp the resource potential of the areas between its branches for fisheries, animal husbandry and later industrial agriculture. But these resource development projects failed around the same time as global conservation regimes expanded. The latter helped to revalue swamps and marshes as biodiverse wetlands. Global conservation projects concerned with wetlands thus helped to reinforce the area’s status as a delta. Similar to what Morita and Jensen show in the case of the Chao Phraya, different versions of deltas can coexist, with new ones not fully displacing the old. In the Danube, a major conflict erupted in the early 2000s as allies of the Danube Delta-as-transportation-corridor clashed with allies of the Danube Delta-as-globally-significant-wetland. However, these deltas have in turn not entirely displaced the ways in which Vylkovchany relate to places near the Danube’s mouths that existed before the area became a delta.

Finally, I reflect on the use of ‘ontology’ to speak about deltas. As I argued above, the term ‘delta’ almost automatically positions us ‘above’ the landscape because of its entanglement with modern cartography, engineering and state-building agendas. Lebner (2017b) interprets Strathern (2012) as alerting us to a hazard that the concept ontology poses for anthropological analysis. Strathern (2012) recounts a dream in which the final image is one of her hovering over a field of pansies, unable to walk on them because of wooden supports holding the pansies in place. Lebner provides a compelling interpretation in which she argues that Strathern’s dream is a comment on how ‘society thinking’ haunts the ontological turn.
The problem is that ontology, like ‘society thinking’, leads to the creation of overly abstract and tidy models, and the identification of units that can be compared. This in turn obscures the careful redescription of relations – ‘the ever-entwined interpersonal and conceptual distinctions that hold life together’ (Lebner 2017b: 225). In an anthropology of river deltas, anthropologists should be mindful of the impulse to equate the place we study with the view ‘from above’. They could begin by tracking the relations that lead us (and others) to do so – and to apprehend an area as a delta – in the first place.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Franz Krause, Mark Harris, Volodymyr Pivtorak, Victor Ostapchuk, Derek Hall, Gisa Weszkalnys and two anonymous reviewers for providing feedback that has improved this chapter. Special thanks to Ashley Lebner for conversations that helped inspire the chapter’s approach and sharpen its argument. This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant #410–2009–2161.

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Notes

1. I use the official Ukrainian spelling of Vylkove, Vylkovchany (resident of Vylkove) and other place names when discussing the contemporary period. I use the Russian spellings of Vilkovo, Vilkovchani and other terms when quoting from Russian-language sources or interviews. All my discussions with Vylkovchany and Reserve staff took place in Russian.
2. Between June 2008 and May 2018 I conducted ten months of fieldwork, mainly around Vylkove, during trips ranging from two weeks to three months.
3. Morita and Jensen do not explicitly define ontology or cosmology. In other work, they have indicated that when they use the word ontology they have in mind an STS-informed definition of practical ontologies that refers to ‘material-semiotic reconfiguration’ (Jensen and Morita 2017: 619) and ‘how worlds are concretely made, conjoined or transformed by the co-evolving relations of multiple agents; people, technologies, materials, spirits, ideas’ (Jensen and Morita 2015: 82). Their reference to ‘Hindu-Buddhist cosmology’ in describing galactic polities suggests an encompassing philosophy or worldview, though they do not explicitly say so.
5. ‘Delta’ was not a word used at the time. Victor Ostapchuk, personal communication, 1 July 2019.
6. Bakhtalovskii’s work is considered valuable and original by historians of Vylkove because of the way it combines oral testimony and documents from the mayoral office that were subsequently destroyed.
7. Traditional forms of housing construction are quite rare now as they have been replaced by different forms of brick and concrete (Richardson 2018).
8. For comparison, see Cameron and Matless (2003) on how fishermen’s knowledge was subsumed into the scientific account of the *plaur* in Marietta Pallis’s article ‘The Structure and History of the Floating Fen of the Danube Delta’.

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