Traditiones 55 (2): 133–153 | COBISS: 1.01 | CC BY 4.0 | DOI: 10.3986/Traditio2026550207

On the Essay's Place in Scientific Writing: Toward a Disobedient Epistemology

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The article examines the use of essays within *hodinars*, interdisciplinary field events developed as part of the research programme Heritage on the Margins and the project Route Biographies. It sheds light on the essay as a genre and its place within the social sciences and the humanities; furthermore, it offers a reflection on the role of the essay in science, whose nature can be described as non-linear, rejecting deductiveness, meandering and slow, as well as disobedient.

▪ **Keywords**: essay, *hodinars* as walking-writing seminars, writing as method, multimodal scientific writing, disobedient epistemology

Članek tematizira uporabo esejev na hodinarjih, interdisciplinarnih terenskih dogodkih, razvitih v okviru programa Dediščina na obrobju in projekta Biografije istrskih poti. V besedilu najprej osvetlim esej kot žanr in njegovo mesto v družboslovju in humanistiki, v nadaljevanju pa na podlagi primerov iz lastne prakse podam premislek o vlogi eseja v znanosti. Naravo eseja opišem kot nelinearno, ki zavrača deduktivnost, je meandrirajoča in počasna, a tudi neposlušna.

▪ **Ključne besede**: esej, hodinarji, pisanje kot metoda, večnačinsko znanstveno pisanje, neposlušna epistemologija

Two questions

When, at the beginning of 2025, the first textual and video essays arrived for the essay collection *FootNotes*, developed within the project Route Biographies (ZRC SAZU) and the research programme Heritage on the Margins (ZRC SAZU), I found myself – acting as the editor of the collection – compelled to pose two questions that also underpin the present text: *What is an essay?* and *What is the role of the essay within scientific research?*

As for the role of the essay in science, I already carried in my pocket a handful of partially articulated answers, developed together with colleagues within the framework of *hodinars*,[1] walking-writing seminars. These I will unfold later in the text. The first

[1] *Hodinars*, as we developed them at ZRC SAZU over the past six years within the programme group Heritage on the Margins (ARIS, P5-0408 (A)), and as I later further elaborated them within the project Route Biographies (ARIS, J6-4611), can be defined as follows. Hodinars are curated events in which a group of participants walks together over several days while collectively thinking through a particular theme (in relation to places where they walk). The participants themselves, as well as the discussions and experiences that unfold among them and within the walk regarding certain sites, are central to shaping responses (and generating new questions). Hodinars take place in a hybrid space between analysis and fieldwork, where the seminar format intertwines with ethnographic practice, without a clear boundary separating the two. They are coupled with experimental writing, in which walking and writing become a methodological and epistemological intervention.

question, however – seemingly the simpler one – proved far more troublesome. In the context of editorial work, it was a question of a very practical nature, demanding concrete and immediate decisions. The incoming texts had to be evaluated according to the qualities of the essay; authors had to be advised to do this or that. Yet in truth, at least at the beginning, I was improvising, offering future authors guidance more by intuition than certainty, much as I myself was still grappling with the form while shaping my own essays.

If an author used too many references or footnotes, I asked them to reduce citations to what was strictly necessary. If thoughts took the form of clear, assertive statements, I encouraged authors to loosen their reasoning. If a timid doubt crept between the lines, I advised writers and video-makers alike to strengthen that trace of doubt in their work. If the texts felt too heavy, I suggested simplifications; if they were too long, I advised shortening – while at the same time entangling myself in (over)long or (over)complex writings of my own. At times, I seemed too lenient in my comments, at others too strict; I judged others with ease, only to commit similar "mistakes" myself, guided by affect, momentary impulses, the material at hand, the topic, and an acquired style of writing.

In the process of learning, editing, researching, and reading, I then encountered the work of David Foster Wallace (2006), the American "excessive" essayist, a multi-award-winning author who in his essays used hundreds of footnotes and routinely exceeded what might be considered the "normal" length of an essay. I also encountered the work of Jamaica Kincaid (1988), the Antiguan-American essayist, and her dense, complex articulations, far removed from any light, leisurely essayistic meandering. Why not? After all, in texts that reflect on essays themselves (Adorno, 1984; Porter, 2012; Badley, 2019; Dillon, 2024), the essay is described as one of the freest genres, an adaptable form that must be reinvented each time anew, depending on circumstances and subject matter; a form with an inherent intention to escape the confines of any genre. In fact, a genre that is not quite a genre at all, but rather a principle operating across genres. A trickster of sorts, refusing the rules of the game while continuing to play it.

All these diverse essayistic writings – which, following Roland Barthes (1977), move within a hybrid space between science, art, and intimacy – take on a wide variety of ever-emerging forms precisely because of these three "angles" of perception. Yet they nevertheless seem to adhere to loosely conceived constants of essaying, which are easier to understand not as form but as a process of thinking with an infinite number of possible outcomes. A non-repeatable conversation with the world. "A method of inquiry through which we invent and assemble the world" (Badley, 2019: 9).

Furthermore, if one is to take on the editorship of an essay collection, it seems that, while reading and observing (textual and video essays), one must look sideways, gaze beyond words and images, into the space between the lines – where the world is not yet fixed, into a swarming time-space where the true qualities of the essay reside.

If we attempt to condense these qualities into a never entirely precise list, drawing on the above writers on essays, it might read as follows: the essay perpetually doubts and avoids the traps of certainty; it is fragmentary and spontaneous; focused on the everyday; it reveals the contradictory nature of knowledge; it is heretical, rejects deduction, imitates the process of thinking; it is a (self-)critical practice, a practice of testing ideas,[2] an art of slow contemplation; painfully personal yet capable of decentring; its content is not fictional, but its style is creative and continually reinvented; it is playful and serious at once, hesitant, solitary and social, instructive, seductive, and mystifying; adaptable and direct; it leads to insight, not to catharsis. The essay is the language of conversation, transformed into written form.

The present text adopts many characteristics of the essay, even as it deliberately evades some of them (not least through its use of footnotes and scholarly citation). In this sense, the text is itself a paradox. It acknowledges ongoing concerns surrounding so-called "creative" writing: the risk of aestheticization in place of analysis; the tension between accessibility and academic legitimacy, particularly in relation to peer review and disciplinary standards; and the alignment of anthropological "creative" writing with a cultural economy in which originality, style, and personal voice operate as forms of marketable capital, a space where everything risks becoming "a joke". To confront and answer these concerns, the present essay starts from the idea that the problem of aestheticization lies not in literary expression as such but in the possibility that rhetorical force may substitute for epistemological clarity. Also, the text attempts to write playfully and seriously at the same time, embracing and understanding playfulness as an indicator of a specific kind of seriousness (Shepherd et al., 2018), questioning along the way the presumed separation between theory and practice by revealing the process of thinking through writing. Ultimately, through its own example of form–content entanglement, the text foregrounds the following question: is multimodal writing in anthropology merely a richer, more layered narration of research experience, without analytical consequence, or do such ethnographic experiments[3] themselves possess analytical and theoretical potential?

In the first section, I will attempt to view the essay within a broader temporal and disciplinary context, primarily within anthropology. In broad strokes, I will sketch different types of essays, with a particular emphasis on critical and research essays. In the second section, I will unfold the use of essays within hodinars – interdisciplinary field events developed as part of the research programme Heritage on the Margins (ZRC SAZU)

[2] The word *essay* originates from the French verb *essayer*, which means "to try", even in a very literal sense (e.g., *essayer un chapeau* – "to try on a hat"). The essay as a text aligns well with this meaning, since in a way it can also signify the testing or trial of ideas.

[3] The term *experiment* is not used here in a narrow scientific sense; rather, it indicates an openness to the unexpected, the random, the unlikely, the seemingly irrelevant, and also to the "joke", in a manner similar to how the field of experimentation is understood in Eleana Yalouri's article 'Entanglements: Experiments in Multimodal Ethnography' (2022).

and the research project Route Biographies (ZRC SAZU) – and illuminate the process and purpose of multimodal scholarly writing that reaches beyond academic discourse while remaining in constant dialogue with it. It is here that we will also touch upon the concept of disobedient epistemology (Mignolo, 2011), one of the central ideas of decolonial thought, which, among other things, underpins hodinars and "disobedient" modes of writing developed within these walking-writing seminars.

In the concluding chapter, I will reflect on the qualities and purposes of using essays within present-day scientific research. And methodology? The methodology of the article is, in fact, writing itself, preceded by walking, reading, (day)dreaming, listening, mingling, gazing, talking, and hanging – and, perhaps above all, by the playfully serious joy of turning experience into meaning, and meaning into words.

The essay as apeirogon

I first encountered the unusual-sounding word *apeirogon* on the cover of a novel by the Irish writer Colum McCann (2020), which uses the metaphor of an infinite-sided polygon to describe relations between Israel and Palestine. An *apeirogon* is, in fact, a theoretical mathematical figure, a kind of infinite polygonal shape, that can also serve as a point of departure for thinking about the essay, a kind of never-completed, disobedient knowledge. In the context of this text, we will primarily discuss the essay within anthropology and, more broadly, the humanities and social sciences, while first outlining the historically recognized coordinates of the essay.

Many historical surveys of the essay (e.g., Porter, 2012) begin with the famous French essayist Michel de Montaigne, the Renaissance humanist who, like many of his contemporaries, was inspired by ancient writers and is widely regarded as the originator of essayistic writing. His work, titled *Essais*, was first published in 1580 in Bordeaux, and Montaigne continued to revise and expand it over time. As Porter (2012: xii–xvi) notes, the use of the first person singular in his often ironic, provocative, and always hesitant, wandering, and floating texts was radical for its time. Montaigne once wrote, "if my mind stood on solid ground, I would not write essays, but make decisions" (Montaigne in Porter, 2012: xiii).

Beyond the celebrated literary qualities of his writings, perhaps the most important fact for our discussion is that his first-person style opened the door to voices outside traditional authority. It circumvented the prevailing literary norms, allowing words to spread widely. As William Hazlitt, the early nineteenth-century English essayist, observed, Montaigne was the first modern author to write publicly about what he thinks as a human being (Hazlitt in Porter, 2013: xvi). And although Montaigne came from a noble family, his writing can certainly be seen as a critique of the dominant practices of behaviour and writing of his time. As Porter notes, Montaigne may have

felt discomfort in facing uncertainty, yet he believed that understanding the changing nature of human thought has not only philosophical value, but also political power to challenge prevailing authoritarian practices (ibid.: xiv).

Jeff Porter, in the introduction to *Understanding Essays* (2012), wonders how the essay appeared so late, given how naturally suited it seems to human reflection on the world. Why is there no Bronze Age essay? Why did Nestor not comment on the Trojan War in an essayistic manner? Porter concludes that had they done so, Aristotle surely would have devoted a chapter to the essay in the *Poetics*. Classical writers and heroes, however, do not doubt; Homeric heroes have no time for hesitation or reflection, and even the most "suspicious" among them, such as Odysseus, does not question his actions (Porter, 2012: xii). Perhaps Porter overlooked the practicalities: in those times, a thought recorded on paper or inscribed in stone had to be damn sure to justify the effort. It appears that essays originated in oral culture and later evolved into written form. Perhaps the earliest essayists were forgotten storytellers, side characters in the main narratives, whose words lingered in the in-between space between spoken and written forms.

And essaying within anthropology? The texts written by anthropologists, likely because of the very nature of anthropological work, seem to have always been flirting with literature; they stand closely next to journals, memoirs, and travelogues, even at a time when travelogues are considered a pulp genre and even when a literalised text (may) close the door to academic and research positions to anthropologists. Anthropological work is closely related to life, the everyday kind that includes banal and chaotic clusters of unforeseeable events and circumstances, the settled and the changing, the emotional and the unspoken, albeit present. The urge for such writing thus does not emanate merely from the material itself, that is, from the observed, but also from the specifics of the anthropological fieldwork. Anthropologists appear in a double role – as a tool of research, receiving information; and as a tool of putting research into words, conveying information. When expressing intense sensorial and emotional field experiences, anthropologists also express situations and events following the atmospheric specifics of the field and our own affects (Rogelja Caf, Ledinek Lozej, 2026 [in print]).

Adrie Kusserow (2017), who studied violence in Sudan, transformed her field notes into what she called "poems of discomfort", to capture the emotional nuances of tragic events that are nearly unimaginable, and which classical academic texts either leave unsaid or which the analytical language cannot adequately render. Her poems function in the scientific text almost like photographs, letting the material choose its own form of expression. She explains her approach: "Maybe the beyondness needs a different tone of voice, a more vulnerable and more empathic one" (Kusserow, 2017: 87). Though her field example is extreme, similar reflections can be extended more broadly to the articulation of anthropological field experiences. Through observational

methods, we harvest the imponderables of life[4] (Malinowski, 1922: 17), which may be better captured by more flexible forms of narration.

In addition to Malinowski, who in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) often employs a personal, confessional tone and reflective observation, Margaret Mead does similarly in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). We can continue with Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), with its descriptions of sunlight at dawn and dusk, and reflections on Brazilian rain. Such personal, essayistic records of ethnographic experience are far from mere wandering through the researcher's subjective emotional landscapes; rather, they can be understood as "a faltering search that never seeks to reach its goal in a linear way, but constantly meanders, repeatedly and brutally cutting into the edges of the goal itself." (Mendiževec, 2016).

Within the literary turn, with writers such as James Clifford, George Marcus, and others, the essay in anthropology emerged as a critical practice: a text that reflects the method, the author, their position, and their writing, as exemplified in *Writing Culture* (1986). In recent decades, essaying in anthropology has become common practice: authors observe and comment on their own research steps (e.g., Sarah Pink in *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2009, where video documentation is central),[5] illuminate power relations in literary-critical form, follow Orwellian practices, or produce works combining theoretical, literary, and narrative-descriptive passages, as in Anne Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushrooms at the End of the World* (2015), which asserts: "The time has come for new ways of telling true stories" (ibid.: vii). Many other works as well have employed literary techniques in recent decades, often embedded within articles or books as vignette-style inner texts, or using essays as the primary mode of writing.[6] Anthropological blogs can also be seen as essays, such as the collection *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment* (2020), drawing on the famous blog *Savage Minds* (later renamed *Anthrodendum*).[7]

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[4] As Malinowski wrote: "there is a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality. Let us call them the *imponderabilia of actual life*. Here belong such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people; the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behaviour of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him" (1922: 17).

[5] Simultaneously but also in earlier phases, visual anthropology also developed in Slovenia. One of its key trajectories runs through institutions such as the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and ZRC SAZU, where ethnographic film often emerged as an extension of fieldwork, including its reflexive and methodological dimensions (see Križnar, 1996).

[6] For example: Behar, 1996; Taussig, 2000, 2011; Crapanzano, 2003; Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015; Pandian, 2015; McLean, 2017; Rogelja, 2018; Petrović Šteger, 2021; Potkonjak, Škokić, 2022; Muršič et al., 2022; Svetel, 2024.

[7] *Anthrodendum*; https://anthrodendum.org/.

One might ask whether essays can be categorized according to theme, writing style, or format (video versus text) to identify those most suited to anthropological research. Such categorization of the elusive apeirogon seems doomed, yet perhaps a provisional sketch helps guide further reflection. The tripartite schema I propose here serves as a starting point.

When I first sketched three bubbles, the first contained literary essays, the second academic essays, and the third research essays. While the academic essay (in the Slovenian academic context better known as a seminar paper) primarily tests knowledge, the research essay serves a different purpose: it is a critical journey through the material of the research question, personal experiences with the question, and reflection on literature or fieldwork, aiming to transform what we know and have experienced into something new. The literary essay, by contrast, is freer, unconcerned with research questions or critical reflection, yet can appropriate such techniques along the way and approach the research essay (as Jamaica Kincaid does). Research essays may also be literary, often employing narrative techniques, as in the work of Adrie Kusserow and others.

Many classifications of essays come from literary studies. For example, Graham Good, in *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988: xi–xii), historically divides essays into four types: the travel essay, preceded by movement through space;[8] the moral essay, reflecting and weighing values (e.g., essays of English moralists such as Francis Bacon); the critical essay, an intellectual judgment or dialogue with the read material; and the autobiographical essay, preceded by memory and self-reflection (e.g., Montaigne). Perhaps more relevant to us is Good's typology by mode of thinking: the research essay (born of curiosity, without predetermined conclusion or moralizing intent, bringing more questions than answers); the speculative essay (allowing the writer freedom, a "what if" essay); the contemplative essay (slow introspection, e.g., of an event); and the argumentative essay (developing a line of argument in a personal, less academic tone).

Following certain classic authors, anthropological essays – texts written in a somewhat personal, confessional tone about research topics, the field, or field experiences – might be divided into: ethnographic essays on places and communities (e.g., Malinowski); (self-)reflective essays (such as introductions to anthropological books revealing the author's engagement with field and topic);[9] theoretical essays, often lacking direct empirical material but engaging in dialogue with research, concepts, and ideas, frequently in a critical tone yet still including personal reflection; and experimental

[8] Space enters the essay relatively late, for example in the works of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), such as *Walking* (1862).

[9] This is also where visual anthropology becomes central, particularly in terms of analyzing methodological approaches and the author's own positionality, while some authors also adopt an essayistic form (e.g., Favero, 2013; van de Port, 2018). On cinema, anthropology, and the essayistic impulse, see also Thomson (2017).

essays or essayistic books, bordering on art, characterized by fragmentation, literary techniques, openness, and variability of form.[10]

Although the above categorisations are often imprecise and overlapping, they may help us reflect on our own essayistic endeavours. In the following lines, I will highlight some of the efforts within selected projects and programs conducted at ZRC SAZU in the last two decades.

Walking between noting and inscription

Within the framework of the research programme Heritage on the Margins (ZRC SAZU 2019–2027) and the project Route Biographies (ZRC SAZU 2022–2025), we began experimenting with hodinars – curated events in which participants, through shared walking, writing and conversation, reflect on a specific theme. Such walking-writing seminars take place in a hybrid space between analysis and fieldwork, where the seminar format intertwines with ethnographic practice, without a clear boundary separating the two.

In the aforementioned research group related to heritage, the initial use of hodinars was primarily connected to the desire to establish interdisciplinary dialogue, as researchers came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Several days of shared walking through a specific area – one tied to our research questions about heritage and heritagisation – offered a space for dialogue. Discussions that would usually take place within seminar rooms were moved outdoors; our seated bodies were set in motion. In doing so, we expanded the temporal frame of conversation (fieldwork usually lasted several days), shared a common experience of walking and encountering the terrain (albeit briefly), and engaged in evening reflections on the research questions we had posed. Throughout, we kept field diaries, and in the evenings, organised discussion workshops in which we deepened our understandings, often through writing exercises of some sort or by using our photo material.

Methodologically, our use of walking-writing seminars followed the guidelines of Nick Shepherd, Professor of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Aarhus University and Professor of African Studies and Archaeology at the University of Cape Town, as well as other experiments in ethnographic and research walking. Shepherd conducted multi-day walking seminars in South Africa as part of the programme Heritage and Public Culture in Africa, grounding their theoretical premises closely in decolonial studies.[11] As Shepherd and his collaborators wrote in the introduction to *Walking*

[10] Although there exists a considerable body of literary works in the form of novels written by anthropologists (e.g., Ghosh, 1992; Pandian, 2014, Rogelja, 2018; Ferlež, Rezman, 2019, Podjed, 2024, and many others), anthropological novels are not the subject of this article.

[11] The walking seminar, as practised by Shepherd and his collaborators, becomes a decolonial intervention in which participants interrogate hegemonies of knowledge, Western epistemologies, and the relations

Seminars: Embodied Research in Emergent Anthropocene Landscapes (Shepherd et al., 2018), these seminars pursued three central aims: to explore the intersections and boundaries between conventional scholarship and forms of artistic research and practice; to employ walking as a methodology for investigating landscape and history; and to rethink time, materiality, and memory.

One of the guiding ideas behind Shepherd's walking seminars was the desire to erase hierarchies between theory and practice, between scientific research and artistic practice, and also between disciplines – a kind of erasure of boundaries that does not negate the integrity of diverse forms of knowledge. To this end, Shepherd's seminars were designed to encourage hybrid collaborations, bringing together architects, philosophers, choreographers, anthropologists, and others to think collectively about a pre-defined research question. At the centre of interest lies the relationship between "seriousness" and "playfulness", and their fusion through research walking. As Shepherd and his collaborators write: "I do not understand playfulness in opposition to seriousness, but as something in a far more complex relationship with it, as an indicator of a specific kind of seriousness" (Shepherd et al., 2018: 13). Seminars conceived in this way appeared to be a valuable tool for establishing respectful interdisciplinary dialogue, as well as for reflecting on the authoritativeness of scholarly texts and dialogue more broadly.

Beyond practising interdisciplinary dialogue, some of us also sought to connect walking more firmly with writing. Just as walking opened an (in-between) time for reflection, I became interested in the intermediate step of recording – whether in the form of textual, photographic, or video essaying.[12] Although hodinars draw on numerous prior initiatives, it was in the project Route Biographies that I forged a more explicit connection between walking and writing and on reflecting upon diverse forms of academic expression, mostly textual but including, in part, also "writing with the camera", which materialised in two video essays.[13] However, the multimodal textual writing was at the core of our interest.

The fundamental reflection underpinning this "new" step within the hodinars sheds a new light on the process of writing itself. Writing is usually imagined as the final phase in the sequence of reading–research–writing. Yet writing itself enables thinking. It is, among other things, an in-between space in which analysis is born. Between to jot

between researcher and interlocutors, between professor and student, between student and student, and across disciplinary boundaries. Shepherd's seminars also reveal the influence of archaeology, particularly in their attentiveness to materiality while walking. Participants move primarily through sites burdened with colonial histories, in order to experience space as a material and affective archive of coloniality. Walking here is not merely a method, but a critical gesture that probes relations of power and epistemological hierarchies (cf. Shepherd et al., 2018; Shepherd, 2024).

[12] For examples of essays produced within the project Route Biographies, see the online collection of essays *FootNotes*, which operates as a scholarly online journal under the ZRC Publishing (https://footnotes.zrc-sazu.si/).

[13] Although video essays are not the subject of the present article, readers may find two video essays published at *FootNotes* closely aligned with the reflections developed in the textual essays discussed here. These are the essays 'Archiving Silences' and 'Dragonja FootNotes' (https://footnotes.zrc-sazu.si/archiving-silences/ and https://footnotes.zrc-sazu.si/dragonja-footnotes/).

down (in a field notebook) and to formalize into text (a scholarly article), there lies the often-overlooked act of writing itself – as movement, as process, as a mode of thought.

After several days of walking and workshops, we began writing essays, which we shared after a few weeks, read reciprocally, and discussed in a collective meeting, this time usually in a seminar room. These essays were not intended for publication, but rather for building dialogue among us, and for cultivating our own reflections; a kind of thinking-through-writing. Through reading texts that were hesitant, open, unstructured, and experimental, our conversations moved several steps further in our collective reflection. At the same time, while reading these unfinished texts, I began to ask which aspects of (human) life remain excluded when we adhere to more conventional forms of scholarly expression, and how authoritative writing styles often reproduce colonial and other hierarchical relations of power.

We also reflected on the emergence of analysis within the writing process itself, which stands between the practices of recording (field notes) and inscription (final results). In our experiments[14] with writing, we most strongly embraced the essay – whose nature I would describe as non-linear, resistant to deductive logic, meandering and slow, as well as disobedient. It emerged as a potential bearer of a disobedient epistemology,[15] one that may dare to reveal or even annul the "zero point" from which the world is supposedly observed neutrally, as discussed by Walter Mignolo.[16] The essay's mobility seemed to ventilate rooms of certainty and allow doubt to enter thinking.

Multimodal writing: When writing finds a form adequate to what it describes

Geographer Timothy Cresswell (2019: 1–3) has pointed out that writing is commonly understood as the final step in the sequence of reading–researching–writing, and yet it is precisely writing that often makes thinking possible in the first place. I cannot fully agree with Cresswell here, since anthropological and ethnological research practices have, from the very beginnings of the discipline, relied on field notes and diaries. Still,

[14] See footnote 3.

[15] On the necessity of a disobedient epistemology – one that would fundamentally interrogate the assumption of the "zero point" posited by Western European science, from which the world is supposedly observed in a neutral manner – Walter Mignolo writes in his article 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom' (2009). He posits as follows: "Once upon a time, scholars assumed that the knowing subject in the disciplines is transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured. From a detached and neutral point of observation (that Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez describes as the hubris of the zero point), the knowing subject maps the world and its problems, classifies people and projects into what is good for them. Today that assumption is no longer tenable, although there are still many believers. At stake is indeed the question of racism and epistemology" (2009: 1).

[16] This concern has however a longer genealogy. Feminist and decolonial scholars as well as the literary turn in 1980s have challenged the idea of an unlocated knower, emphasising instead the situated, embodied and partial character of knowledge.

within anthropology, writing has been more consciously recognised and employed as a technique rather than as a method. Writing as method, however, assumes a different role: it is a method that (can) enable thinking and knowing. As Anna Gibbs writes (2007: 1), writing as method does not refer only to researching, but also to making sense of research in the process of research itself. It is therefore a form of writing that is neither merely a field note nor simply the final product of research.

If we slightly rework Cresswell's formulation, we might say that between noting and inscription lies an often-overlooked act of writing: one that enables movement, looser forms of consolidation and dissolution of thought in relation to the material at hand, a particular kind of journey that is part of the research and that also builds the research. At this point, we arrive, like in walking, to a certain kind of meditative writing that tries not to follow the pre-drafted shapes and procedures, but builds in the relation with the research event – it is the event itself, self-referencing and potential, constantly checking its own position and the surrounding epistemologies and ontologies. As one of the participants in the walking seminar along the River Rižana writes in her essay: "Above all, it is a method that encourages associative thinking. The initial question is merely a spark, capable of igniting a multitude of important questions and reflections."[17]

Let me illustrate this with the example of the walking seminar along the River Rižana, which I organised within the project Ethnographies of Land and Water Routes: A Comparative Approach to (Im)mobility,[18] where we also asked questions about the ethnography of a river in the context of posthuman theorising. Among other things, we inquired how one might approach a river ethnographically.

Combining walking with writing proved to be of special importance for the more-than-human ethnographic situation, one predominately characterized, in my view, by uncertainty. Apart from thinking through writing, which is a precious in-between step in various research situations, writing essays also allowed us to be freer with word choice, which seems an important issue when researching a river and other more-than-human subjects. Metaphors and loose language effectively invite uncertainty to be discussed and might open windows for new ideas. In a way, writing a research essay gave us the freedom to touch the invisible present verbally, to express uncertain predictions and guesses, to reflect on stereotypes (humans as saviours) and prejudices (what the river should look like), and to write about the hints given to us by the river; it also allowed us to describe the overall atmosphere, so as to put into words the modus operandi of the Rižana River, namely the *oozing*. The Rižana, at least during the summer months, does not flow – it oozes, even underground, where the limestone bed, shaped by the river itself, allows water

[17] Ana Jelnikar, https://footnotes.zrc-sazu.si/the-river-woman-and-mortadella/.

[18] The project was carried out at ZRC SAZU between 2014 and 2017 under the leadership of Nataša Gregorič Bon. Within this project, I organised the first walking-writing seminar, trying for the first time to bring writing to the foreground. Later, I developed a more complex methodological plan, encompassing writing as a method within the Route Biographies (ZRC SAZU) project.

to move slowly and to pool. In the summer heat, our steps, too, began to linger, and the bodily desire for water, intensified by heat and drought, began to shape ethical reflections within us (Rogelja Caf, 2022). With the notion of oozing, we (perhaps) moved from (subjective) affective attunement to (dialogic) affective resonance, to use Gibbs' (2007) words, reaching the point where writing finds the form adequate to what it describes.

One of the purposes of working with unfinished essays, in which participants reflected on how to approach the river ethnographically, was to introduce greater complexity and sensitivity into ethnographic writing, in order to forge a deeper connection with the research question. Another reason why authors employ alternative modes of writing within scholarship, whether as exercises in dialogue or as published essays, anthropoetry, and similar forms, is to break with conventional notions of representation and subjectivity. As Pandian and McLean write:

> some of us take experimental writing as a way of lending greater nuance and sensitivity to the project of ethnographic understanding, and thus of entering more profoundly into the lives and worlds of others. Other contributors to this book seek, in writing, new means of breaking with conventional notions of representation and subjectivity, putting the anthropological category of the 'human' itself into question. We float this volume with the faith that inventive, appealing, and intellectually adventurous writing can serve both of these ends, while also reaching out to wider and more diverse audiences. We hope to show that such experimentation is essential to anthropology's role in the contemporary world, and that it is one of our most powerful means of engaging it. (2017: 8)

Building on the tradition of the literary turn of the 1980s, the contributors to the volume edited by Anand Pandian and Stuart L. McLean push reflections on writing further, beyond the reflexivity of the writer and their role, by situating experimental ethnographic writing within questions of responsibility. They reflect on complex field situations to which conventional modes of inscription do injustice: they erase silences, trim emotionally charged moments, and bypass subtle shades of distress and joy that exist beyond spoken words. "There is a sense that the social sciences and humanities build a certain authority by maintaining distance from direct witnessing, from direct involvement in people's lives" (Paper Boat Collective, 2017: 13).

Rather than opting for critical distance, the authors of the volume choose vulnerable writing – writing in which authors, readers, and the text itself are all at risk (Paper Boat Collective, 2017: 15). Underlying this choice is a desire to decolonise and move beyond authoritative writing, toward engaged and situated forms of expression and more complex modes of articulation. Yet in their reflections on unspoken and unsettled field voices, the authors of *Paper Boat* are by no means pioneers. Others have long considered

the complexity of non-linguistic knowledge and the challenges of representing such knowledge, among them the anthropologist Maurice Bloch in his article 'Language, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science' (1991), and later Mark-Anthony Falzon, editor of *Multi-Sited Ethnography* (2009).

Bloch (1991: 183) speaks of the complex forms of knowledge gained through participant observation and of the importance of non-linguistic ethnographic understanding. Falzon (2009: 9–10) reflects on the predicaments anthropologists face when writing about the fieldwork. When we explore a topic through observation as a method, we inevitably also harvest "weeds" – that rich, non-linguistic knowledge – and it is precisely here that experimentation with essayistic and other looser forms of writing may help. Field diaries, essays, lists of things, events and sensations, the assembling and reassembling of such lists, collective writing and readings of research essays, or simply personal reflection through writing are all attempts to bring writing into the research process. Following our own experiences, a loose process of writing, an unfinished text that multiplies points of entry and exit, may build a bridge between non-linguistic ethnographic understanding and the (final) written outcome of research, while its meandering flow may (at times) establish unexpected connections.

Within the broader debate on multimodality in anthropology, our contribution gradually became focused on a specific question: that of multimodal writing, a comparatively under-reflected issue within multimodal discussions. Multimodal anthropology, emerging from the observation that social life is inherently multisensory and mediated through diverse forms, has largely approached multimodality through the use of sound, photography, film, performance, installations, mapping practices, and digital platforms.[19] But, as Eleana Yalouri (2022), building on Janet Wolff (2012), has cautioned, attempts to move beyond the dominance of text should not be understood as emancipation from it, as such gestures always carry the risk of losing critical dimensions. Rather than abandoning writing, the challenge lies in reworking its role while sustaining its analytical, critical, but also disobedient capacities. Within our reflections on multimodal writing[20] and on

[19] Against the background of such approaches, which partly displaced writing from the centre of attention, lies, among other influences, the post-linguistic turn: a shift away from the idea that language constitutes the primary or exclusive medium through which the world is understood.

[20] Speaking of multimodal writing, numerous examples of experimental and non-conventional writing have appeared throughout the history of anthropology, starting from the early 20th century, mostly by women researchers (Mead, 1928; Hurston, 1935, 1937; Deloria, 1988). Some of these writers occupied the margins of what was considered "legitimate" anthropology in their time, yet quietly reshaped it from within. Through their multimodal writing, they challenged male-dominated ideals of objectivity, rigid academic genres, and ethnographic authority. For example, Hurston, in her monograph *Mules and Men*, writes from an embodied, participatory perspective, integrating herself into the community she studies and using oral traditions, storytelling, and humour as legitimate forms of knowledge, thereby documenting a communal and Black female epistemology. Deloria, in *Waterlily*, employs fiction as an ethnographic method, centring women's lives, kinship, motherhood, and emotional labour. Both authors demonstrate how narrative, subjectivity, and experience can constitute valid anthropological knowledge, prefiguring the feminist and decolonial approaches that would emerge later (see also Rogelja Caf, Ledinek Lozej, 2026 [in print]).

the role of writing within the research process itself, writing thus does not simply return as a privileged medium, but re-emerges both as an epistemological question and as an ongoing research practice – something to be reconsidered, reconfigured, and experimentally engaged alongside other modes of knowledge-making. Together with numerous other scholars (e.g., Pandian, McLean, 2017; Ballestero, 2019; McGranahan, 2020; Pandian, 2025) and building on the legacy of various theoretical perspectives (e.g., the literary turn, feminist critique, decolonialism, the Anthropocene, posthuman theorizing), we experimented with various genres, from anthropoetry, story maps, collaborative forms of writing to different kinds of essays. However, I noticed that this opening up of possibilities does not mean that such forms are equally suited to all ethnographic research situations. As Taussig (2011) notes in explaining his decision to include hurried drawings in his text, anthropologists need to adopt modes and aesthetics of writing that remain faithful to their fieldwork experience. It is precisely this attentiveness that seems important, if not crucial, in order not to lose our way as researchers.

The role of the essay in scientific research

In this concluding chapter, I would like to shed light on the answer to the second question posed at the outset: What is the role of the essay in scientific research? The answers that follow are based primarily on my experience of writing essays within the previously mentioned research groups, where the act of writing was always preceded by several days of collective walking. This long-lasting group activity, whereby walking is intertwined with writing, has undoubtedly also shaped the responses presented here, which should therefore be understood in the specific context of the hodinars: collective, walking-and-writing interdisciplinary research events, where art and science meet. Within these groups, the essay served, in methodological terms, primarily as a "tool of the in-between step", a space in which our field notes were transformed into a somewhat more kneaded and reflected textual form, intended for use in group discussions among the participants of the walks. Although some of these essays were later published, it was precisely the process of essaying (writing – mutual reading – discussion – rewriting…) that revealed many of the potential roles and uses of the essay in science (whether as a working text or as an outcome). In what follows, I summarise the most salient among them.

Reflecting on one's own values and biases

In essays that were not intended for immediate publication but rather for mutual reading within a closed circle of researchers, we dared to say more – to describe personal feelings, including stereotypes, prejudices, and fears. Through this (self-)knowledge, strengthened in dialogue with collaborators (with whom we had previously shared a

multi-day experience), we were later able, in our published texts, to more firmly articulate the researcher's entanglement in the research process itself. In several cases, even the published articles retained, to a certain extent, a personal, more engaged, and less formalised mode of writing (e.g., Rogelja Caf, 2022; Gombač et al., 2025).

Inviting doubt into reflection

It seems that the slowing down of writing in the meanders of the essay (which, in my own experience, I can compare to a meditative, very slow form of thinking-through-writing) affects thought in a way that endeavours to be more hesitant. A similar effect is produced by writing outside strictly structured forms and modes of scientific writing, as such writing more readily invites doubt into reflection. In our walking essays, which in their style often moved toward more literary modes of articulating field experience, participants found it easier to speak about matters that had not yet been fully thought through but perhaps contained promising starting points. At the same time, we were able to speak more confidently and openly about our reservations regarding potential dead ends in the research, about our own (in)competencies or missteps, fears, poorly framed questions, and so on. Doubt[21] can also function as a safeguard against misleading certainty embedded in colonial relations of power, as discussed by the above-mentioned authors from decolonial studies. In this sense, the essay can be seen almost as a tool of disobedient epistemology. Tentative and hesitant writing (which the essay, in my experience, enables but by no means guarantees) may possess several qualities. For instance, it can establish interaction between author and reader, and may even be understood as an epistemic strategy, one that allows for interpretative openness and scientific caution, reduces dogmatism, and sustains dialogue. And if we are to be consistent in our practice, we must also cast doubt on tentative writing itself. Important warnings have been raised regarding restrained, hesitant expression, suggesting the need for balance: overly tentative texts may obscure an idea to the point of vagueness, while excessive assertiveness may appear clear and convincing but closes off space for alternative interpretations (cf. Milostivaya et al., 2020). Let me add a further reservation of my own. Essays are usually not overly structured nor firm in their claims,

[21] Although a critical analysis of doubt in scientific articles is not the focus of this text, the article by Yao et al. (2023) can serve as an illustrative example. Based on an analysis of predominantly natural science articles published between 1997 and 2021, the authors identify an increase in assertiveness in scientific writing and a decline in doubt. They write: "Our findings show that the use of such hedges has significantly decreased in the past 25 years in the research articles of the Journal *Science*. In addition, we propose that the drop of such hedges in *Science* research articles may be an implicit writing strategy for research promotion, and therefore may correlate with the rising linguistic positivity in academic writing" (ibid.: 4541). Although doubt appears to be "at home" in the humanities and social sciences, it may be precisely because of this taken-for-granted, implicit assumption that the issue of doubt in the humanities and social sciences receives little attention. In the context of the above discussion, reflections on overly "doubt-laden" texts that blur clarity of expression are also of particular interest.

yet structured modes of writing also help us think, with the caveat that, in the research process, structures must repeatedly be dismantled and reassembled.

Expanding dialogue

In our case, the essay also served as a tool for establishing dialogue among researchers. This seems particularly important for qualitatively oriented research, where researchers, who often themselves function as research instruments, may (and often do) feel isolated. The discussion space that emerged after the mutual reading of essays thus illuminated blind spots or new possibilities within long-term research projects (on which some of the walking practices were based). Notably, it was often the "ignorant" writers, meaning those who did not know much about the topic but commented on the process from the perspective of their own discipline and research concerns, who most frequently pointed out oversights, missteps, taken-for-granted assumptions, and the like. Here, the essay offered an expansion and deepening of discussion among participants, which proved particularly fruitful in situations of interdisciplinary and intersectoral (science–art) collaboration.

Illuminating analysis

Although analysis is a constitutive process of ethnographic work, it receives relatively little attention. Rare discussions (among them the volume *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis*, edited by Andrea Ballestero and Brit Ross Winthereik in 2021) pose the key question: "How does the alchemy of analysis actually happen?" (Ballestero, Winthereik, 2021: 1). Rather than developing a general discussion of analysis, they illuminate analysis as an event. One way to help us address the question of how, in ethnographic research, we arrive at insights that are not self-evident is precisely the use of writing (in our case, the essay). The essay mimics thinking; it is a process of testing ideas, and in its best form, it is self-critical and unafraid to reveal the contradictory nature of knowledge. In its meandering, it turns now in one direction, now in another, and without a sense of guilt dismantles positions it had set up only moments before. The essay appears to be the language of inner dialogue – perhaps even the time-space of analysis itself.

Time

One of the defining features of interpretative methods is their iterative nature: long-term repetition and circulation, movement between interpretation and material, which develop together. It seems that, over recent decades, interpretative disciplines have been deprived of precisely this step (in other words, the time of the long conversation) for various reasons that lie beyond the scope of this article. The essay, as a slow and meandering form used for research purposes, may help extend the time between noting something down in a field notebook and writing it up in a scientific article. Itinerant essay-writing

deliberately remains in the in-between space of no-man's-land. And it is precisely there, in this no-man's-land where analysis is born, that we can, as the French philosopher Michel Serres writes, "approach the turbulence of life that precedes the emergence of a discursively intelligible and recognizable world" (1997: 65).

In conclusion

In a text that is itself a kind of essay about the essaying, I first presented the essay as a genre; its history and its place within the social sciences and the humanities, especially anthropology. In a second step, drawing on examples from my own practice, I focused on experiences of multimodal writing within interdisciplinary research groups operating at ZRC SAZU. Based on these experiences, the final part of the article outlined the role of the essay and essaying within scientific research, and highlighted several aspects. Among the first is the possibility of reflecting on one's own values and prejudices, which the essay – painfully personal yet capable of decentring – offers to researchers. I then addressed the invitation of doubt into writing, which can (and sometimes does) open space for multiple interpretations of reality. As a third dimension of the essay's role in science, I pointed to the expansion of dialogue that the essay can provide, both in its function as a research in-between step, and as a published text that may more readily reach broader publics. In this sense, the third of the angles mentioned in Roland Barthes' text in relation to the essay (science, art, and intimacy) is likely crucial. When a writer (publicly) speaks from their own human situatedness, the reader's response may shift. Equally important is the illumination of analysis, a process which, according to the editors of the book *Experimenting with Ethnography: A Companion to Analysis* (2021), can occur in multiple ways, including through the process of thinking-in-writing. Seen from this perspective, the essay seems important as it stretches the time of iteration, allowing prolonged repetition and circulation, a continual movement between interpretation and material, developing together – a process that enriches understanding in interpretative disciplines such as anthropology. However, the essay form, which we predominantly used in our hodinars (walking-writing seminars), represents only one possibility within multimodal writing and may not suit every situation, since anthropologists should adopt modes and aesthetics of writing that remain faithful to the experience of fieldwork.

Essays as final outcomes, condensed and crystallised, can function as particular kinds of ethnographic documents of reflection, standing in for ethnographic vignettes (cf. Rogelja Caf, Ledinek Lozej, 2023). They may appear in professional articles written by scholars for the media in order to reach wider publics, or they may take the place of a differently articulated scientific text. In the latter case, at least two hypothetical paths of reflection open up. One could argue that scientific essays grounded in research and key literature, and incorporating an account of methodology, differ from

classically structured texts merely in style. Another path of reflection might reject such heretical thoughts, sharply distinguishing essays from scientific texts that require a strict, agreed-upon scholarly apparatus, vocabulary, structure, and perhaps even style.

What if there are other possibilities, which suggest that essays and other multimodal forms of representation are not merely differently worded scientific texts – even though they may contain all the magical ingredients of the scientific text – nor are they separate from science? As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explains, living and researching in capitalist ruins requires new ways of telling true stories. "To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge?" (2015: 37). Following this line of thought, essays and other modes of articulation within science may be understood as messengers of a new epistemology, one that follows the changes we live through and seek to research.

Research data statement

The author states that no new research data was created or analysed in this article.

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O mestu eseja v znanstvenem pisanju: k neposlušni epistemologiji

Članek tematizira uporabo esejev na hodinarjih, interdisciplinarnih skupinskih terenskih dogodkih, razvitih v okviru raziskovalnega programa Dediščina na obrobju in raziskovalnega projekta Biografije istrskih poti (oboje ZRC SAZU). V prispevku se osredotočam na tekstualne eseje, nastale v okviru zgoraj omenjenih projektov, pri tem pa osvetljujem proces, namen in učinek večnačinskega znanstvenega pisanja. Čeprav se hodinarji opirajo na številne predhodne pobude, smo znotraj omenjenih skupin uvedli še svojstven poudarek na pisanju kot metodi in refleksiji različnih oblik akademskega izražanja. Spraševali smo se, kateri vidiki (človeškega) življenja ostajajo izključeni, kadar se oklepamo bolj konvencionalnih oblik znanstvenega izražanja. Kritično smo preizpraševali, kako avtoritativni pisni slogi pogosto reproducirajo kolonialna in druga hierarhična razmerja moči. Reflektirali smo rojstvo analize znotraj procesa pisanja, ki stoji med praksama beleženja (terenskih zapiskov) in zapisa (končnih rezultatov). V članku najprej osvetlim esej kot žanr in njegovo mesto v družboslovju in humanistiki, v drugem koraku pa na podlagi primerov iz lastne prakse podam premislek o vlogi eseja v znanosti (predvsem antropologiji), katerega naravo lahko opišem kot nelinearno, takšno, ki zavrača deduktivnost, meandrirajočo in počasno, pa tudi neposlušno.