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NARRATING AGAINST FORGETTING: RIVERS, DAMS AND ENVIRONMENTAL AMNESIA IN ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVEL *THERE ARE RIVERS IN THE SKY*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to read Elif Shafak's novel *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) as a narrative that combats environmental amnesia by focusing on stories in which the colonization of water and by means of water are a central theme. The novel connects the practices of colonial control and processes of environmental degradation, particularly through its engagement with the damming and culverting rivers. Using Stef Craps' concept of environmental mnemonic care-work (2024), which itself is informed by Ann Rigney's (2021) and Mihaela Mihai's (2022) theories of cultural memory and unforgetting, the article approaches Shafak's novel as a literary intervention that generates memorability and counters forms of ecological forgetting. While environmental loss remains a key focus, the analysis demonstrates how the novel's protagonists reveal the entanglement of environmental amnesia with cultural, historical, and intergenerational forms of erasure. In doing so, the article examines how *There Are Rivers in the Sky* mobilizes the environment as a medium of memory through which ecological, colonial, and cultural histories are jointly remembered and reactivated.

Keywords: buried waterways; environmental generational amnesia; blue humanities; slow violence; landscape amnesia

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Introduction

Amitav Ghosh (2017, 12) famously stated that the climate crisis is a crisis of imagination. He believes that fiction may be the best way to imagine other forms of human existence and that writers should help people broaden their horizons, create new links, and offer new perspectives. Literature, alongside other artistic practices, offers a space where grief, memory, and responsibility converge, reminding us that caring for the past, and for one another, is essential to imagining a livable future. Literature uses a variety of mechanisms to capture our attention and inspire empathy or action, as environmental harm and slow violence resist traditional storytelling.

According to Stef Craps ("Lost Words…", 2024, 41), literature, and art in general, articulate environmental loss and can work against environmental and landscape amnesia. In his article "Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Combatting Environmental Generational Amnesia," Craps draws on two research studies by Ann Rigney (2021) and Mihaela Mihai (2022). Although they are not concerned with environmental questions, as they investigate the (un)forgetting of WWI non-European soldiers (Rigney) and political violence of communist dictatorship, apartheid, and the German occupation (Mihai), Craps argues that their theoretical frameworks can illuminate the problem of environmental generational amnesia. In his essay, he demonstrates the value of literary and other artistic engagements as instances of environmental mnemonic care-work. They play a vital role in curing our planetary amnesia, as we forget what we have lost and do not realize the full extent of environmental degradation that has occurred over time. Furthermore, Craps' adaptation of Rigney's and Mihai's works demonstrates that "unforgetting" is not tied to a single historical domain but functions as a transferable analytical framework applicable to different manifestations of amnesia. Following his conceptualization of literature as a tool of "unforgetting," this article approaches *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) by the Turkish-British writer Elif Shafak as a narrative intervention against forms of historical and ecological erasure that exceed purely environmental concerns while remaining inseparable from them.

There Are Rivers in the Sky

There Are Rivers in the Sky is full of aqueous allusions, which unite ancient Mesopotamia, Victorian London, present-day London and Türkiye, and modern Iraq. All characters in the novel are linked by their interaction with a single drop of water and its life cycle. Water's three atoms (H, H, and O) represent the novel's three protagonists: Arthur, Narin, and Zaleekhah. The book begins in ancient Mesopotamia with a raindrop falling on Nineveh's king Ashurbanipal. This single raindrop becomes a snowflake and takes readers to mid-Victorian London, to the shores of the Thames, to witness the birth of Arthur Smyth, who in his adult

life researches cuneiform tablets removed from Mesopotamia during the colonial period and now housed in the British Museum. Arthur's narrative foregrounds the epistemic and material violence of imperial extraction. His personal history is marked by the pollution of London's rivers in the nineteenth century; it is this environmental injustice that leads to the death of Arthur's sister during a cholera epidemic.

The water droplet reappears in Türkiye, in 2014, when we meet Narin, a-nine-year-old Yazidi girl who lives along the Tigris, and whose family face imminent displacement as a result of the construction of the Ilisu Dam. Through Narin's story, Elif Shafak's novel depicts the consequences of megadam construction and forms part of what Nixon (2011, 154-155) calls anti-dam writing, as it shows the disastrous human and environmental consequences of dam building. The novel depicts the physical displacement of local communities, their very often violent removal and resettlement, which break their relationship to the land and history, and make them "surplus people" (Nixon 152). The story shows development inflicted destruction, and makes visible the intertwined nature of ecological devastation, and colonial desires of possession, domination, and extraction. In Narin's narrative, water becomes a medium through which colonization, displacement, and spatial amnesia operate. The flooding of ancestral land and forced displacement intersect with 2014 genocide of Yazidis, which is the backdrop of Narin and her grandmother's pilgrimage to Lalish. This narrative describes the brutality, and systematic violence of Islamist extremists.

In 2018 London, we meet Zaleekhah, a depressed hydrologist, who studies water and the impacts of climate change. She is particularly fascinated by the rivers that have been buried, entombed in sewer pipes, and reduced to a trickle. Her story reveals how forgotten rivers shape and are shaped by human existence. Her work extends beyond scientific inquiry; she perceives water as a storyteller, carrying the residues of past civilizations, industrial contamination, and climate upheavals. This attention to the material and mnemonic qualities of water positions water as a connection between times, places, and beings. Water, in its many formations, drives the action of the novel and serves as a metaphor, showing the unseen connections across time and space. As MacLeod (2013, 49) observes, "[w]hen water appears in metaphor as the substance through which we encounter other times and places, the reader's imagination, however unconsciously, recognizes the way this substance acts forever as a meeting place and medium." *There Are Rivers in the Sky* also constitutes such a meeting place. In this sense it exemplifies literature's potential to fight against forgetting and the invisibility of slow violence.

Blue humanities and hydrocolonialism

There Are Rivers in the Sky explores human-aquatic interactions, it draws attention to the interrelations of bodies, water, histories, and narratives. As Mentz

(2024, 5) argues "multiple forms of water shape human bodies, and human histories." Shafak's novel raises awareness about the transformations of water bodies, induces new ways of interacting and thinking with water, and proposes different narrative strategies to represent the contemporary urgencies about human–water relations. Addressing the problems of water and environmental amnesia, the novel aligns closely with the concerns of the blue humanities (see Mentz 2024; Oppermann 2023; De Wolff, Faletti, and López-Calvo 2022; Dobrin 2021). The 21st century scholarship brought new discourse based on thinking with water. Although initially focused on the global ocean, it studies all planetary waters from multiple perspectives. Blue humanities examines the role of bodies of water in cultural imaginaries, aquatic naturecultures, and concentrates on interrelations of water, histories, and narratives (Oppermann 2-3).

It also encompasses hydrocolonialism, a conceptual framework concerned with colonization of water and through water. It links "water, its management and the colonial or neocolonial relations in the modern era" (Hofmeyr 2022, 16). As Susanne Ferweda (2024, 15) observes, blue "addresses colonial inheritances and critiques colonial desires," it highlights hydrocolonial approach to bodies of water and "resurfaces and subverts transoceanic colonial connections." This dynamic reappears in Shafak's novel through the recurring motif of lapis lazuli stone: "It's blue. Lapis lazuli. An extraordinary traveler through time" (Shafak 126). This metaphor highlights the resource imperialism and the continuity of colonization and oppression that affect both human and nonhuman world. As a highly valued source of ultramarine pigment, lapis lazuli is associated with early capitalist trade, imperial expansion, and the consumer demands of wealthy nations. The stone thus evokes colonial histories and legacies of extractive violence (Ferweda 5–8).

The themes described in *There Are Rivers in the Sky* all resonate with contemporary forms of domination over the environment. Rivers serve as metaphors for how empires control flow of life, history, and narrative. Rivers which sustained civilizations are now polluted and harnessed by dams that also bear "histories of colonialism, racism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation" (Haiven 2013, 214). By engaging with the abovementioned themes Shafak's novel brings environmental concerns into a dialog with postcolonialism and buries "mutually constitutive silences that persisted for so long between environmental and postcolonial literary studies" (Nixon 236).

Slow violence, environmental amnesia, and mnemonic care

The slow processes of diverting, culverting and damming rivers exemplify the phenomenon referred to by Rob Nixon as slow violence, which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. [It is] neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a

range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2). Although Nixon describes the phenomenon mostly in anthropocentric terms, it applies also to other-than-human entities.

A term related to slow violence is landscape amnesia which refers to forgetting how different the surrounding landscape looked in the past, because the change from year to year has been so gradual. This phenomenon helps explain why people may not notice environmental degradation until it is too late (Diamond 2005, 435-436). Rivers do not disappear in a single day; they vanish slowly, over decades, which leads to landscape amnesia. As more rivers are enclosed, the gradual transformation of the landscape becomes normalized, making each small change seem insignificant. This slow, incremental loss of natural waterways is rarely questioned, as the process unfolds over generations. Meanwhile, landscape amnesia erases the collective memory of once vibrant, flowing rivers that shaped the urban environment. The harmful effects of culverting waterways accumulate over time by erasing rivers from public view and memory, making it harder for people to recognize and cope with ecological loss.

Rivers and people also suffer from extensive dam construction. Dams change ecosystems, contribute to pollution, and cause involuntary displacement, which is associated with various social problems (Oppermann 42). The result is what Nixon calls spatial amnesia: "communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory" (Nixon 154-155). Dams "alter a river's ecosystem from one that's cold, flowing and connected, to one that's warm, stagnant and fragmented – with devastating consequences for wildlife" (Horner 2017). Dam construction may contribute to climate change and desertification, processes that unfold gradually.

Landscape and spatial amnesia are also a form of environmental generational amnesia (Kahn 1999), which is a type of environmental forgetting brought about by prolonged disconnection from "natural" landscapes. It prevents us from recognizing the extent of environmental degradation. As Craps claims, each new generation accepts a diminished state of the world they live in as they cannot compare it against the norm, because they have always lived in a degraded environment. In other words, "they lack an experiential baseline by which to judge the health or integrity of nature" ("Remembering Earth…", 2024, 314). That is why people do not see the urgency of the situation, the full scale of ecological degradation, and the silent annihilation of "unloved others" (Rose and van Dooren 2011, 1).

Craps argues that if works of art and literature register such forgetting, they may also play a role in reversing it. His notion of mnemonic care-work suggests that remembering forgotten histories, communities, and environments is not merely a cognitive or representational act but also an ethical practice. In this sense, mnemonic care-work resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017, 54) understanding of care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair 'our world.'" By recovering erased experiences literature extends care to those who have been excluded from collective memory. Such acts of remembrance involve

not only the production and communication of knowledge but also an affective commitment to what has been ignored or marginalized. As Puig de la Bellacasa observes, care "includes material and affective tasks related to communication, the production of sociability, and capacity of affect" (54). Moreover, care makes us "worry for those who can be harmed by an assemblage but might be unable to voice their concern and need for care" (Puig de la Bellacasa 52). From this perspective, mnemonic care-work can be understood as a form of care that seeks to repair the erasures and silences produced by environmental and historical forgetting.

Although the novel's concern with environmental memory is distributed across multiple storylines, this article concentrates mostly on Zaleekhah's and Narin's stories, which exemplify the harm that occurs gradually and constitutes slow violence that leads to environmental amnesia. Of the novel's protagonists, Zaleekhah is most directly engaged in recovering and transmitting knowledge about environmental loss. Such stories pose narrative challenges, among them finding imaginative forms that expose slow violence of global neoliberal system and neocolonial practices, and rendering visible occluded webs of interconnectedness (Nixon 45). It is visible in Narin's story that dam building is a process in which colonial legacies of dispossession intersect with modern forms of ecological violence.

Narin's story: megadams

In 2014 Türkiye, Narin, is to be baptized in the waters of the River Tigris. The ceremony is brutally interrupted by an intimidating bulldozer driver, who, on the government's order, makes the whole family run away from the place as they are allegedly disrupting the construction of a dam:

> For a confused moment the group remains rooted to the spot, watching the bulldozer scoop away at the earth, hauling out chunks of alluvium from the shores of the Tigris, disturbing the bones of antediluvian animals and dormant rocks that witnessed thousands of years of Mesopotamian history. The machine veers back and forth, and catches underground tubers, dangling like monstrous tooth extractions, in its maw, and rips out the roots of long-ago-felled trees (Shafak 35-36).

The abovementioned quote summarizes the consequences of the construction of the controversial Ilisu Dam. It portrays environmental destruction and erasure of history showing how modernization disregards nature and culture in pursuit of development. Narin's family, standing there in shock and disbelief, symbolizes local communities which are forced to leave behind their ancestral lands. Reference to tubers and trees reflects habitat destruction. Such consequences stem from the construction of megadams, which "transform river-waters into

a commodity that can be pumped, stored, and directed in the service of capital" (Campbell and Paye 2020, 3). These are the schemes of vast hydraulic regimes that conquer nonhuman nature with their anthropocentric logics of efficiency, profit, and progress. The Ilisu Dam impacts unique ecosystems and endemic species in the Tigris valley, including the biosphere reserves of the Iraqi marshes. Such environmental injustices carry violence across multispecies life, drastically altering human livelihoods and eliminating those of the nonhuman (Oppermann 42). The building of megadams is an example of exploitations, which, "not only govern water, but consolidate the experience of inequality" (Campbell and Paye 2). In 2000, the World Commission on Dams found that dams were responsible for displacing between 40-80 million people ("Lessons Not Learned"; Horner). Nixon (7) claims that such displacements smooth the way for forgetting, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them. He describes that "expulsion typically predates the arrival of the police, the dogs, the lorries, the bulldozers, and the engineers. Thus, the direct violence of physical eviction becomes coupled to an indirect bureaucratic and media violence that creates and sustains the conditions for administered invisibility" (Nixon 151). Spatial amnesia is what follows this process: a condition in which historical and cultural significance is lost or forgotten.

At the time of the construction of Ilisu Dam, the Turkish government stated that around 2,000 families or 15,000 people would have to be resettled and the town of Hasankeyf, which is the ancient cultural heritage, would be fully affected. The dam caused the submergence of 81 cultural sites which are places of international historical and archaeological significance. The dam's construction represents a state-imposed reshaping of geography, internal colonialism within Türkiye, as it silences the memory of millennia of civilizations. The flooding of Hasankeyf brings to mind the flood which was an act of renewal in *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* In Narin's story, the flood is the reversal of renewal as it obliterates a cradle of civilization and destroys collective memory. It is described by Shafak with these words:

> A 12,000-year-old history will be obliterated by a dam that will last 50 years – the lifespan of a mule. This region – home to churches, chapels, mosques, monasteries, synagogues and shrines – has already lost so much of its heritage. Most local populations have migrated to cities, near and far, where they have been swallowed by the currents of urban life, severed from the traditions that always sustained them. It was usually the elderly who stayed behind, delaying leaving until the last moment possible; they were the ones who found it hardest to part with their memories (Shafak 34).

The abovementioned quote illustrates the fact that typically the human toll begins with those dispensable, anonymous, invisible inhabitants who reside in the "the world beyond." They are victims of progress, evacuated from

their land, imaginatively erased from public awareness (Nixon 151-152). The megadam exemplifies what Nixon calls attritional catastrophe, in which official landscape is forcibly imposed on vernacular landscape shaped over generations. As communities are dispersed, they lose their relations to history, culture, land and riverine ways of life (Nixon 7). Narin's and her family's lives are upended by the dam project. Like many dam-affected populations, the characters experience forced migration, cultural erasure, and economic hardship. Such slow loss of history and nature is often ignored when construction is presented as development. This might be the reason that there is limited societal resistance to the state's hydropower projects (Akbulut, Adaman and Arsel 2018, 96). The slow process of planning, construction, and submersion makes the loss appear less urgent; protests fade, new landscape becomes a reality and seems normal. Future generations will only know the reservoir; they will not remember Hasankeyf as an ancient town. The building of the Ilisu Dam reveals how environmental loss is intertwined with the reorganization of space. Forced displacement severs memory from land, water, and cultural practice, producing both cultural and environmental forms of forgetting.

Narin's story shows how the submersion of Hasankeyf entails the submersion of memory and how relocation produces spatial amnesia, not because people forget, but because memory loses its physical anchors. Mnemonic care in this case is oriented toward endangered modes of relating to land, water, history and community that are at risk of becoming unintelligible. Narin's story, by sustaining non-colonial spatial imaginaries, makes Hasankeyf a site of memorability that resists archival erasure. In presenting land and water as inseparable from cultural belonging, it counters the epistemic violence of colonial aphasia (Rigney 12) and challenges dominant narratives of human progress (Mihai 9). Through Narin's perspective readers witness injustice, suffering and erasure of culture. Alongside her family they see the felled trees and the degradation of the environment caused by bulldozers. The novel encourages readers to engage emotionally and intellectually with Narin's experience, to hear victims' voices, and to see the world of forcibly removed Yazidi people from "a different embodied positionality and emotional horizon" (Mihai 8).

When Narin's family are deprived of their home and also a place to perform baptism, they set off to Lalish to get holy water from sacred springs for ceremonial purposes. On their way they become victims of the massacre of Yazidis. Here, genocide may function as mnemonic template to understand environmental collapse. Genocide and ecocide, both entail domination and destruction, death and displacement. The parallels between them may help readers make sense of the climate crisis and rethink ethical implications of environmental exploitation (Craps "An Inconvenient Comparison…", 2026, 3).[1]

Narin's narrative shows how environmental generational amnesia works with other forms of historical and cultural erasure. It presents environmental memory as inseparable from cultural and historical transmission. Narin's and her community's displacement entailed the loss of natural habitats, related ways

of living, environmental knowledge, and affected their relationship to the future (see Sköld 2025, 451). Narin's story changes the focus of mnemonic care from remembering lost environments to protecting spatial relations whose destruction produces both cultural erasure and environmental amnesia.

Zaleekhah's story: buried waterways

There Are Rivers in the Sky expresses both postcolonial preoccupation with displacement and an ecocritical preoccupation (see Nixon). The story of Zaleekhah is full of examples of violence done to rivers. Zaleekhah resurfaces these surplus bodies that were destroyed, turned into waste sewers, blamed for outbreaks of diseases, and finally buried to accommodate the city's expansion (Talling 2011). In exploring these colonized bodies of water, Zaleekhah resembles the novel's other protagonist, Arthur, who lovingly tends to "what has been discarded, damaged and forgotten" (Shafak 217). Archeologist and translator of ancient cuneiform tablets retrieved from Nineveh, rediscoverer of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is engaged in restitution of plundered artwork. By way of analogy, rivers are also victims and objects of colonization and humans' attempts of domestication because we see them as material value, as transport routes and energy resources. We use them as "ultimate sinks" for waste (Knoll, Lübken, and Schottp 2017, 3).

Shafak is not amnesiac toward non-American geographies in her novel, and showing that violence is inflicted on rivers everywhere in the world she "can generate interest where there was none before" (Rigney 15). By interweaving the lives of characters from diverse backgrounds *There Are Rivers in the Sky* facilitates transcultural communication and transcultural memory. Their stories are connected through the river Thames and Tigris, as well as the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Such narrative structure bridges cultures and time periods fostering collective memory and transcending boundaries.

Zaleekhah, a hydrologist of Iraqi heritage living in contemporary London researches the city's lost rivers. Her work connects the underground rivers of London with the Tigris, where her ancestors once lived. Iraq is a country historically known as "land between two rivers," the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is heavily dependent on surface water from the aforementioned rivers that originate in Türkiye, and on the Karun River that originates from Iran. They provide nearly all of its water supply. The lack of international agreements to share the water between these three countries, together with climate change, makes Iraq extremely vulnerable to water crisis (Al-Shakeri 2025). It is this background that might inform Zaleekhah's interest in hydrology and rivers. Through her studies and personal reflections, the novel links histories of water mismanagement, colonial urban planning, and forced migration, showing how different cultures interact with and remember (or forget) their waterways. The

conversation between Zaleekhah and her uncle reveals that slow violence done to rivers is a global phenomenon:

> The tourists who walk around Paris today admire the Seine, but they don't realize there's another river flowing beneath their feet.' 'We've quite a few of our own here in London,' says Uncle Malek. 'That's right,' says Zaleekhah. 'New York, Vienna, São Paulo, Sydney, Beijing, Moscow, Toronto … There are lost rivers almost everywhere on the planet. Not many foreigners are aware that Tokyo used to be a city of water. It's still an incredible place, of course, but more than a hundred streams and canals have been filled in and used as a base for roads or just hidden under pavements (Shafak 163-164).

The buried rivers of such cities as Paris or Tokyo mirror the broader tendency of the suppression of waterways and prioritization of urban expansion and profit over free flow and vitality. The novel connects the abovementioned problems to colonial histories of controlling water sources in Iraq or building dams in Türkiye. It makes us aware that environmental amnesia is not just local but global. Waters are all too often made nearly invisible, relegated to a passive role as a resource, and subjected to containment, commodification, and instrumentalization. Rivers lose their gestationality when engineering projects colonize them and turn them into submersible merchandise (Oppermann 41).

There Are Rivers in the Sky also maps out the transformation of London rivers, from vibrant, life-giving forces to forgotten currents flowing beneath the surface of modern urban life. Shafak illustrates how the city's progress has entombed its natural past under layers of infrastructure and forgetfulness.

> […] the Tyburn, a source of delicious fresh salmon in the distant past, though barely remembered these days, as it flows unseen and unheard underneath celebrated urban landmarks. The Walbrook, once a sapphire-blue river running through the Roman fort of Londinium into the Thames, shimmering like the wing of a dragonfly, provided residents with clean water; now it only feeds into a malodorous sewer. Then there is the quaint and charming River Westbourne – 'the royal stream'. When Victorian engineers could not find a way to build a Tube station above the river, they made the river run through the station instead. Today, invisible to thousands of commuters, hidden in plain sight, it pours through a pipe above the platforms in Sloane Square Tube station, after being entombed in London clay to make way for the prosperous terraces of Chelsea and Belgravia above. […] They are all there, roiling beneath the cement pavements and the tarmacked streets, rumbling and rushing under strata of concrete and bricks, buried under sediments of history and the weight of amnesia (Shafak 198).

Coloniality rendered these bodies of water invisible. As Krupa Ge (2019, 17) writes: "They had been around … for as long as time can be. And yet we said

there was no place for them in the city. All we saw of them was their struggle for survival …when we passed by them, we covered our noses and looked away."

Literary techniques for mnemonic care-work

The abovementioned forms of erasure are transformed by Shafak into objects of attention and care - in other words, into forms of mnemonic care-work that contribute to environmental, spatial, and colonial "unforgetting." It takes place through the features and mechanisms described by Rigney and Mihai. According to them, artful narrative fights conditions of colonial aphasia, captures our attention and stimulates emotion which is central to esthetic experience, and makes it memorable. It generates prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) as it constitutes experiential mode of narration (Erll 2011). It builds empathic bridges to the sufferings of the more than human, invites readers to share a defamiliarizing (Shklovsky 1965) view of the environment, facilitates transcultural communication and memory, and interrupts habitual forms of perception opening the possibility of new imaginative responses (Al-Saji 2014). These narrative strategies become especially significant when we consider how environmental degradation and biodiversity loss are experienced over long temporal scales; how they can be made visible and remembered, and "what it takes for inert or occluded aspects of the past to become memorable (again)" (Rigney 12). Nixon also believes that thanks to imaginative writing, we can understand the threats that are slow, remote, and imperceptible to the senses. Writing brings the slow violence into imaginative focus and makes it accessible to readers by helping "make the unapparent appear" (Nixon 15).

Rigney claims that the narrative act of resurfacing the forgotten can also be seen as a form of prosthetic memory, a concept explored by Alison Landsberg, according to whom texts mediate memories and experiences enabling readers to emotionally engage with the events they have not directly witnessed. *There Are Rivers in the Sky* mediates Zaleekhah's emotional investment in buried rivers, allowing readers to fight landscape amnesia and imaginatively reconstruct the lost waterways of London. The foundations of Buckingham Palace were once a swamp, and were built over one of the tributaries that Zaleekhah is studying.

> London for her has never been a capital of solid, sturdy architecture and historical monuments and leafy public parks but rather a city carved by water, smoothed by tide and flow, an ever-expanding reservoir of fluvial memories, some obliterated, others repressed, still others forcefully gushing, like its many rivers and their tributaries. They are everywhere – the ghost streams (Shafak 197).

London, a city shaped by its rivers, has forgotten its original waterways. This forgetting is a key example of the violence enacted in the name of progress and erasure of environmental memory by urban development. Zaleekhah's encounter with the underground waterways can be viewed as a defamiliarizing process, as familiar streets, parks, and buildings become alien when Zaleekhah leads us through spaces where hidden rivers flow beneath the city. London's grounds cease to be solid and stable and take on new meaning. This defamiliarization prompts reflection on the environmental and historical significance of waterways which were once celebrated for their life-sustaining properties and served as the city's vital arteries but are now culverted and conveniently forgotten. Shafak's experiential narrative (Erll) immerses readers into the sensory and emotional world of Zaleekhah. One can feel the protagonist's sorrow when she realizes how many people walk over buried rivers without knowing about their existence; one can feel her frustration with city officials who view rivers as obstacles to progress. Through Zaleekhah's engagement with buried rivers, readers do not just learn about them but experience their absence alongside her.

Zaleekhah's research becomes a form of *anarchiving* which is understood as a research-creation practice based on response-ability (Haraway 2016, 12), stewardship, care and reciprocity in human and more-than-human relations. Such practices open the archive to "affects, bodies, performances, and other ephemera not traditionally considered archivable" (Springgay, Truman and MacLean 2019, 3). By the same token, Zaleekhah becomes a curator, a care taker (Shon 2022, 132). Remembering and resurfacing the colonized rivers she becomes, to use Mihai's (899) expression, a "caring refusenik," a memory agent who "nurtures a plural space of memory making." This space encompasses also bodies of water. Such an approach affords a way of integrating human-centered concerns with social and environmental justice animating a bio-inclusive process of decolonization that asserts relationality, mutuality, connectivity, and responsiveness in the present (Rose 2017, 51-52).

The multiple forms of water "have made cities," as Pavoni and Wafer (2019, 64) remind us, "almost through their negation, containment and domestication (at least in Western planning logic), but also in their spectral and haunting qualities: the threat of bursting forth." Zaleekhah's research reveals how London's development erased natural water systems, yet the rivers persist underground, sometimes flooding basements or streets through cracked pavements. London's buried rivers become spectral presences: they expose the infrastructure of forgetting and they insist on being felt. They are neither dead nor alive (Derrida 1994, 192), just as the history of slow violence is never past as it inhabits our bodies traumatically, epidemiologically, ecologically (Nixon 8). Their periodic resurgence indicates hauntological temporality, where the past infiltrates the present, disturbing the control of urban planning and domination.

The novel invites us to listen to these spectral flows together with Zaleekhah. Her act of listening to the buried rivers' faint sounds emphasizes defamiliarization of the environment and constitutes a reminder of what has been lost: "As she closes

her eyes, waiting to descend into a drugged sleep, she can hear a gentle lapping in the distance. They are all there. The lost rivers of time, out of sight and out of mind but notable in their absence, like phantom limbs that still have the power to cause pain" (Shafak 206). The lyrical descriptions of Zaleekhah's sensations and feelings while she follows the ghostly traces of London lost rivers create an almost mystical atmosphere as she hears the faint sound of water flowing beneath.

Listening is a powerful and active process. By listening to the nonhuman forms of life Zaleekhah responds to what Puig de la Bellacasa (58) (following Harding, 2008) sees as a call for "a more radically democratic way of listening to neglected things speaking 'from below'", speaking for the subaltern, "intervening in the count of whom and what is ratified as concerned." Zaleekhah, investigating and talking to ghost rivers, gives them their voice back, and in this way, she counteracts environmental amnesia as spectrality conceptualizes marginalization, victimization and postcolonial identities (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017, 13). The ghosts force Zaleekhah, and at the same time the readers, to deal with the burden of the past, to announce the need for transformation and change (Gordon 2004, 183). The confrontation with a specter also challenges the established ways of knowing (Derrida 6), and in this case changes it into that of multispecies care. The specters of the natural world return and teach us to mourn responsibly and be responsible to the other even after death, erasure or historical violence. When we mourn, we can fathom the loss, which, in turn, may enhance a more caring relationship to the nonhuman world (Sköld 452). Shafak's passages about ghost rivers evoke both grief and wonder, making readers emotionally invested in the forgotten bodies of water. Although they no longer exist as visible features of the city, Zaleekhah's emotional connection to them invites readers to notice what they have previously overlooked, to reconsider the urban space as a living archive of what once was and to extend care on the more-than-human realm.

There Are Rivers in the Sky also makes readers empathize with the suffering of the nonhuman. By illustrating the degradation of the river Thames, the novel creates a sense of mourning and urgency, prompting readers to consider the suffering of natural entities alongside human struggles. It seems to highlight "the deep importance of understanding, experiencing, and thinking about ecological grief and mourning" (Cunsolo 2019, xv):

> [Zaleekhah] and her colleagues have examined dozens of shore and mitten crabs living in the Thames. In every single crustacean they inspected they encountered harmful plastics, their stomachs and intestines clogged with pollutants. More than a few times Zaleekhah found traces of sanitary pads in their alimentary canals. When crabs consume contaminants, they cannot easily flush them out of their system and hence these will be passed up the food chain. No one can tell how many die every year as a consequence of their poisonous diet. They are not the only marine species suffering. Just like dolphins in other parts of the world retain the residues of long-banned chemicals, the eels of the Thames are receptacles for high concentrations of coffee and cocaine (Shafak 114).

The quote depicts ecological suffering and the physical toll of pollution on aquatic life. It also urges readers to acknowledge the shared vulnerability across species. The crabs, eels, and dolphins serve as silent witnesses to the cumulative violence inflicted by human carelessness. The flow of substances across habitats highlights substantial exchanges between bodies and intra-active material agencies. It makes us realize that, as transcorporeal subjects, we are never separate from the world; we form "global networks of responsibility" (Alaimo, 2012, 477), and we are part of the world-body space (Barad 2007, 185). This entanglement is also visible in Arthur's narrative, which describes the death of his sister, who was a casualty of cholera after drinking contaminated water. This episode shows how harm circulates across human and nonhuman domains. By the same token, Oppermann (42) claims in her book *Blue Humanities* that "transforming rivers into the Anthropocene's postnatural sites with […] violent methods has grave repercussions not only for nonhuman but for human lives as well."

In this context, the burial of other rivers reflects a broader form of environmental amnesia, where human societies forget or ignore the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world. Zaleekhah's greatest realization, however, is that these buried rivers are not dead; they are only forgotten. The novel invites readers to sympathize with these trapped bodies of water, treating them as living beings fighting against confinement and calling for recognition. They are depicted as victims struggling to maintain their flow beneath the city. The novel establishes a parallel between forgotten rivers and the fate of enslaved Yazidi girls who "have been completely forgotten […] basically dead to the world. A few lucky ones get saved, but the rest?" They are "prisoners in ordinary neighborhoods where life [goes] on as normal" (Shafak 466). This portrayal of forgotten lives and hidden suffering challenges the reader's habitual perception, creating a moment of affective hesitation when the routine relationship between memory and imagination is broken, allowing for both a reconfiguration of the past and new imaginative responses. Affective hesitation disrupts socially conditioned ways of seeing – what Mihai (50), drawing on Al-Saji (144), calls the ankylotic past. Ankylosis is a medical term that refers to stiffening of bones and joints, which results in a loss of mobility. This term, applied to memory, means that our ways of seeing reality become rigid; they are based on habituated schemas, closed to reinterpretation and resistant to alternative narratives or marginalized memories. Different histories become ankylotic when memories of the colonized are suppressed. Affective hesitation may reclaim their voices, make space for ethical responsiveness, and create new ways of seeing. Zaleekhah's experiences represent "unassimilable events" (Mihai 51) that create tension and discomfort, potentially challenging readers' environmental amnesia by confronting them with evidence that contradicts their normalized perception of their environment. Consequently, Zaleekhah's story breaks the "routine relationship between memory and imagination" (Mihai 51) regarding environmental degradation.

Her narrative might redraw the "perceptual and affective map" (Al-Saji 161), transforming readers' environmental consciousness through affective means.

Zaleekhah's work on buried rivers offers a concrete illustration for affective hesitation. By studying the hidden and documenting the waterways that continue to exist but have been rendered invisible, she challenges the collective forgetting that allows societies to pave over natural systems without acknowledging their presence and importance. At the same time, the novel employs what Rigney (13) calls cultural carriers of memory, such as storytelling, archival fragments, and embodied acts of remembrance, to translate environmental, landscape, and spatial loss into transmissible experience. Rigney does not claim that novelists and artists can bring about systemic changes, nor does she present a romantic vision of repair. However, she argues that they can introduce qualitative changes through collective processes and mobilization of individuals. Each effort to promote ecological literacy is a cultural and political intervention, and novels such as *There Are Rivers in the Sky* actively combat environmental amnesia. Connecting such artistic responses to environmental loss with initiatives and practices of care is what Goldfarb (2006, x) calls the "politics of small things."

Conclusion

The representation of slow-motion disasters with delayed, dispersed, and often invisible effects presents a profound narrative and imaginative challenge. As Rob Nixon explains, these "long dyings," (2) evade traditional storytelling and public memory, making it difficult to rouse collective empathy or political will. This is why literature becomes crucial: according to Lawrence Buell (2005), it allows us not only to witness environmental crises but to imagine alternative futures. Shafak, by giving imaginative form to the slow violence that affects both human and nonhuman worlds, performs mnemonic care-work and strengthens endangered socioenvironmental memory (see Nixon 24). She pits her "creative energies against what Edward Said called the normalized quiet of unseen power" (Nixon 6). She enhances its public visibility. In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, Zaleekhah's determination to trace and recover buried rivers becomes an act of ecological care. Her creation of a prosthetic memory of slow violence allows readers to mourn environmental loss, and invites deeper emotional and ethical engagement. Interwoven with her story is that of Arthur, whose life is devoted to piecing together fragments of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. While Zaleekhah listens to the silenced voices of water, Arthur listens to the ancient words of a civilization long gone. Both are attuned to what has been submerged and nearly forgotten. Narin's story grounds these broader ecological concerns in the lived experience of displacement and spatial amnesia. The construction of the megadam not only floods ancestral land but also erases the vernacular geography of memory: villages, graves, and the intimate topographies of belonging vanish under water. Yet her acts of remembrance resist the amnesia that "progress" imposes on Yazidi

communities. She keeps alive a submerged cartography of care and connection. Narin's story insists on remembering the drowned landscape, reminding readers that remembering is itself an ecological act.

The novel suggests that, like water, language holds power: "Words," a character says, "are like birds … when you publish books, you are setting caged birds free … you never know whom those words will reach" (Shafak 103). In this way, *Gilgamesh*'s themes of loss, resilience, and care echo through the narrative, reinforcing the idea that storytelling may resist the erasure produced by slow violence. As one of the protagonists states: "For me, the epic is primarily about both the fragility and resilience of being human, and, also, it is about the possibility for change. Learning to care for others, not just yourself" (Shafak 332). This resonates with the novel's broader ecological concerns, suggesting that stories can model relational ethics grounded in care and transformation. In this light, literature becomes more than representation; it preserves and reactivates memory. Just as Zaleekhah's work seeks to remember the buried rivers and give voice to lost waterways, the whole novel invites readers to remember what has been erased or overlooked. Zaleekhah's research functions as a form of environmental mnemonic care-work about buried waterways that allows readers to reconsider their own relationship with hidden environmental realities in their midst. Shafak's book recovers a love-language for rivers and constitutes an antidote to environmental amnesia.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Does not apply.

End notes

1. The thorough analysis of analogy between genocide and the destruction of the natural world falls outside the scope of this article. For a discussion of genocide-ecocide nexus see Stef Craps. "An inconvenient comparison: Climate change through the lens of the Holocaust", Memory Studies, 2026, pp. 1-15.

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