This Is Why We Protect the Rivers, This Is How We Love the Rivers

KALI RUBAII

ABSTRACT The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are the sacred world-makers and life-sustainers of Iraq. At the same time, war has transformed them into toxified vectors of disease, death, and neglect. The "river protectors" (some of them identifying as activists, others not) strive to protect and repair their river ecologies from unjust destruction, even as they work under the shadow of prophecy that predicts the irreparable demise of these waterways. This essay explores how people love doomed rivers and what it means to pursue environmental repair and justice in the face of massive, irreversible harm.

KEYWORDS river protectors, ecological repair, Iraq, prophecy, the irreparable

There is no doubt that the rivers are dying. It was foreseen by the prophets: the seven bowls of God's wrath will bring disease, seas of blood, rivers of blood, scorching sunlight, and darkness. . . . Then, before the tremendous earthquakes, the great Euphrates will dry up, revealing treasures over which epic battles will ensue.

But today is better than tomorrow. A turtle hatches and climbs onto a young boy's palm. He flips it over while it wriggles, too young to be afraid of him. It makes a splash when he drops it back into the water. It swims away, waddling. Dragonflies circle in the reeds while the boy's father fishes. Later, they will drive to the highway, park on the side of the road in the desert, and open the trunk of their car full of carp to sell. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers are the arteries, the roads, the sewage system, and the world-makers of Iraq. As earth beings, they are more than resource, more than water: they make lives convivial. They are the veins and the sacred beings of this place.

At the same time, Iraq's twin rivers are toxified, harbingers of disease and death, more than water because they also hold material contaminants, memories, and fear from ongoing war and subsequent political neglect. They flow into the Shatt al Arab, the kidneys of the world, a great alluvial filter for what is laid

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to waste. These rivers cut through national and subnational boundaries, carrying sweet life and bitter death to the far reaches of social contact.

When a dam in Turkey was built above, the flow became stagnant and thick: more eutrophication, more fish death.

And who does not remember, when the wars of 2004 leveled Fallujah,[1] watching bodies float facedown in the water passing under the bridges like bloated toy boats, hair streaming out behind?

What is it like, loving a doomed river? What does one do living in the middle of a prophecy, in the middle of war after war, in the midst of the extraction of black gold, cholera, and sandstorms that block the sun? And how does one love these elemental forces prophesized as both the vectors of demise and the source of survival?

The ecological and ethical webs of river repair and river love are spun by an eclectic group of "river protectors" dispersed all over Iraq. The river protectors are sometimes self-identified activists and sometimes not: sometimes their actions—swimming in rivers and lakes, walking alongside the rivers, fishing, photographing life on the water, taking water samples, cleaning up trash, making art, or even just talking about rivers—are considered by state regimes to be activism, and sometimes they are not. While campaigns for ecological repair after militarized inundation and extraction are often met with either indifference or zealous neoliberal takeover, the river protectors are cultivating grassroots intimacy among the people as a route to repairing not just the river ecologies themselves but the social life they foster.

The rivers are not just vectors of war violence, although the first US war of 1991 and the second US war of 2003 accelerated cascades of mass destruction and left fragmented buildings, missiles, and cars adrift along the riverbanks. But what started to kill the rivers more quickly were the policies imposed in the wake of the United States' second war. *Deregulation*, *privatization*, and *globalization*—these big words were made into policies that invited private corporations to inundate the rivers with trash and sludge, or to mine the rivers, aquifers, and valleys for aggregate, minerals, and anything else.

For the river protectors, river death is an inevitable and irreparable loss. Theirs is a commitment without alternatives. Living well and dying well are the same project.

Publics

"We used to drink directly, now we have filters." Leila tells me this as she nevertheless takes a scooped hand of water from the rivers and sips it. Fallujah's public water systems were destroyed during the battles of US occupation almost twenty years ago. They were never repaired because privatization meant neoliberal individuation: instead of investing in repairing the public filtration system that brought potable water to all taps, the "postwar" economy went the inevitable way

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of flooding the market with private in-home filter systems each family could purchase.

Filters are cheap. The loss of a public is expensive.

"Now," Leila tells me, "no one cares about the condition of the river. No one is paying attention to the bigger picture. It is just one house at a time. Same for electricity." Families that can afford it purchase and burn fuel in private generators because the municipal grids provide about two hours of electricity a day. "It is not acceptable to face these conditions individually. We should be united. We should demand more than sitting in the dark."

Drinking water is to corrupt postwar development as fish is to a bicycle.

Bodies

Those who do not eat fish have a common reason: we do not want to eat the death and flesh of human bodies.

Last time I was here was 2015: ISIS time. Now it is 2022, and I am going house to house, interviewing families about exposure histories for an environmental health project. I ask questions like: Did you handle metal fragments? How close were you to the explosion? Did you cough, wheeze, or sneeze? And questions like: How often do you change your water filter? Where do you get your vegetables? How often do you eat fish?

I am asking about fish because of heavy metal accumulation; those who don't eat it are worried about death accumulation. "Don't the fish eat the dead bodies?" some say. "We have seen many dead bodies in the water," others say. They are reminding me that rivers are toxified, although differently from how I understand it.

But people like Leila do eat the fish. "Touch the water," she says, aware of my diasporic relationship to Iraq. "You have to make contact. You have to keep touching, even if it is contaminated."

Part of returning to one's homeland after a war is touching and handling metals, bodies, broken buildings. Cleaning up is the first task of all returnees—and everyone here, living out the many wars that the treasures of this land entice, has been a returnee more than once.

Contact

James, who grew up in Iraq but fled in the 1990s, returned ten years ago. He does something he calls "chasing the rivers." Like Leila, he believes in intimate contact. Four people get into his four-wheel-drive Jeep and head to a part of the river that is dammed, a small lake in Kurdistan, to swim across it. Three of us swim; the fourth takes a canoe. It is 1.5 miles to one side of the lake and 1.5 miles back, twice as far as I have ever swum. Although this is a group that keenly observes the effects of pollution, no one mentions the condition of the water: the act of

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swimming in the lake is exhilarating, perhaps even spiritually cleansing. For a moment, we set aside our critical gazes and just experience joy. A plastic bag wraps around my leg at some point. Later, I see some trash floating ahead and dive under to swim past it. Somehow getting closer to the dirtiness makes me safer, cleaner, better. I mention this later to James, and he says, "Yes, because not being in it doesn't make it cleaner!"

James spends his free time organizing three-day-long river swims and day-long river trips with children. Chasing the rivers, swimming in them, loving them, and depicting love in photographs of river life are his ways of confronting false human borders. "One year, I chased the river from the top up in Turkey all the way to the Shatt al Arab. Can you imagine? We had to sneak across many different boundaries."

He is fearless: earlier, we took water samples from just below the La Farge cement factory, to check pollution levels from the unregulated plant. He just walked right up, climbed the fence, got the water, and climbed out. Security guards were everywhere, and it was tense, but he shrugged: "I don't give a fuck. I care about the rivers. They point to the falseness of all these fences." The love and joy of immersion is reparative, but it is also subversive. More than anything, it is honest.

Testimony

It is evening, and behind me are young people murmuring in curiosity and affection, flirting with each other in the colorful lights that dance on the surface of the water. Khalil leans on the railing of the restaurant, which is a tethered boat floating on the Euphrates.

I turn to Khalil, who is young with bright eyes but somehow ancient for a twenty-year-old. I break the quiet serenade of crickets and youth with my voice: "Why do you protect the river?"

"Three reasons: First, the river is God's creation. It is sacred."

He points to the fish swimming past us under the surface of the water: "Second, the river does not belong to us. It is also for the fishes and the frogs. It is not ours to destroy."

"Third," he looks up and makes eye contact with me. "This river connects us to other communities, all the people downstream—the villages, Baghdad, Basra. I care about them."

Khalil uses a military tactical mapping tool that makes me question who he is working for. I later learn he is more of a hacker type. He maps river waste dumping, traveling the rivers, documenting where missiles are embedded in the riverbanks or where hospitals are dumping medical supplies into the water. His audience is underdetermined: the maps he makes go to government agencies, activists, whoever will pay attention. I ask if he thinks his work is effective. "Of course not."

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He is testifying into an abyss under the premise that if a tree falls and no one is there to hear it, it absolutely does make a sound.

Protest

Ayman[2] was front and center in the 2018 popular protests, getting environmental regulations into the policy demands. Having fled to Kurdistan, he was in hiding until he could get to Europe a few months later. One evening I was at dinner with a group of activists in similar situations. A dish fell and broke. Ayman jumped with the too-quick, too-strong reaction of someone who has experienced a recent trauma. I knew he had been detained by the Iraqi police after being in Tahrir Square during the protests and that he continued to organize community members through activist organizations. I also knew Ayman was based in Baghdad until after his detention, when he brought his family to a different region.

When I asked about his jumpiness, he told me more: he was detained for several weeks, interrogated often, and threatened with torture.

> They would take a glass bottle and threaten to sodomize me with it. They did other things, too. They threatened my family . . . but then I kept telling them, "Look guys, you need to care about this too. I am talking about the air you breathe and the water you drink. Don't you care where this trash ends up? Like this bottle, after you put it up my ass, where will it go—in the river where you get your fish for dinner? Is this the Iraq you are protecting?" In the end, I think they were more convinced. Sometimes they seemed to be really concerned and asked me things like, "Can you tell us if this place has radiation? Can you test my water if I bring some from home?" Things like this. It's a lesson for me: we have to organize *everyone*.

Ayman was released just two months before we met, under the condition that he would not continue activism, which, of course, he had continued even during his detention. His sense of humor and stubborn attachment to his work mean he has no intention of leaving Iraq for long, but he told me he would like to leave for just a few years until things calm down for him politically. He continues to work with the knowledge that "eventually they will kill me. If I don't leave, they will kill me."

To the question I keep asking—"Why do you protect the rivers?"—he responds, "Without the rivers, there is no civilization."

Time

I stand looking out across the Tigris at the ruins of Saddam's self-congratulatory tower in Babylon. It is all marked up where skaters have turned the slope of the walls into jumps. Graffiti is everywhere, and below are ancient ruins. I am gazing out at a wide swath of green date palms, like a skirt on this monument, layers of

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human oppression, dominance, violence, power, culture—the cradle of civilization, birthplace of sedentary agriculture. I feel, or can imagine I feel, civilizations layered beneath me, stacked up in the dirt, and that always-new, always-fresh river cutting through time, cutting across the horrible violence of those empires.

These date palms below me spread out across space and time, even as they soak up what I understand to be a very high density of metals from the detritus of war. These dates will feed and contaminate many bellies. (Contact is inevitable, whether we are immersed in these waters or not.) These dates will travel far, carrying seeds with memories of the Tigris, not unlike fish who metabolized the dead bodies of war.

The thing about the inevitably irreparable is that it has its own ongoing legacy. What is inevitable and irreparable does not just disappear. It is infused in river fluid and fruit flesh. It is like an amniotic sac. Or at least, that is how it seems when my friend Hameed, the date farmer, repairs his irrigation canals for the hundredth time after yet another military skirmish—each time a loss, each time a tree death. Each time he mourns; each time he plants more.

Life

When I first met Mohammed in person, he drove me to a mass grave of unknown dead outside of Fallujah. We walked the aisles of headstones, numbered cement slabs, as he recounted burying the bodies there after the first 2004 battle. "We pulled out so many strange corpses, and a dump truck hauled the bodies here and dumped them out. We buried so many of them, without even washing them. . . . The smell of flesh was so strong, and the bodies were bloated, partially decayed; some had big heads like watermelons; some had very strange colors."

He trailed off, as he often did, recounting the violence of US occupation. His brother was tortured by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib, and then he was too. He remembered when an American tank was driving behind him, its driver shooting at his tires and laughing. Often his stories turned to the unwashed corpses: burying the unwashed bodies felt disrespectful, more disrespectful even than using a dump truck to move them. I came to know Mohammed as a burdened man with dusty, bloody memories and haunted, sleepless nights.

But on my last day with him we arrived at the Euphrates riverbank—cool, rushing, turquoise water. He dared me to jump in, and, to his surprise, I gathered up my long skirt and dove in. When I resurfaced, I watched a man transform into a boy as he wound up for a leap and cannonball-jumped into the water. Laughing, we traveled back in time to his childhood: "I used to come here and do this every day after school. It has been so many years since I jumped into the river. My corpse is washed!" We laughed at his joke until I choked on the current and sputtered.

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The Inevitable and Irreparable

I am bathing a toddler in the shallow, warm water of a large plastic bucket. She is lively, still frog-like. One day, this body will be a corpse. It is inevitable. Which bath will be her last?

What has been prophesied is just vague enough to leave one unsure of her place in the flow of time, in the lifetimes of others. After all, this is not the end of a prophecy but the middle of it.

Foresight protects nothing because end times are amniotic. The Tigris and Euphrates are more and more toxified, more and more violated by wars and extraction. They appear in people's lives like so many living things, as beloved, doomed beings. The question is not if the rivers will die but how they will die, and where one will stand when the last drop of water evaporates.

The inevitable and irreparable is a realm of irreversible destruction. But the irreparable is yet to be determined, and justice remains in play; the inevitable death of all living beings is not the same as the wanton destruction of rivers, a kind of inevitability that is irreparable.

The people in these stories attend to the demise of a thing by doing many last acts, repairing the irreparable in the face of the inevitable. This is what people do in their end-times, their last days on earth. They swim in a lake, plant a tree, bury the dead, play with a turtle, protest, take a sip of dirty water from the river that makes their homeland a home. They make contact that simultaneously sustains and harms them. Living out a prophecy is not about merely accepting inevitable losses. Instead, it is about confronting unjust destruction with a choice about how to love a river at the frayed ends of time.

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Note

1. Referred to by the US military as the First Battle of Fallujah and the Second Battle of Fallujah, the United States and coalition forces launched two bloody battles in April and November 2004.
2. For more of Ayman's story, see Rubaii, "What Displacement Teaches Us."

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