Critical Language and Literary Studies(CLLS) 2026 September; 23(38) doi https://doi.org/10.48308/clls.2026.245846.1503

Research Article

"They Never Listen": Indigenous River Knowledge and Colonial Misrecognition in Anita Heiss's *River of Dreams*

Pouya Aghaverdizadeh[1], Sarina Moradi[2], Lale Massiha[3]

[1] MA English Literature, University of Tabriz, Iran. Email: aghaverdizadeh98.ms@tabrizu.ac.ir

[2] MA English Literature, University of Tabriz, Iran. Email: s.moradi98@ms.tabrizu.ac.ir

[3] Assistant Professor, University of Tabriz, Iran. (Corresponding Author) Email: l.masiha@tabrizu.ac.ir

Received: August 2026
Revised: September 2026
Accepted: September 2026
Published: September 2026

***Corresponding author:**
Assistant Professor,
University of Tabriz, Iran.
E-mail: l.masiha@tabrizu.ac.ir

Citation:
Aghaverdizadeh, Pouya . Moradi, Sarina. Massiha, Lale. "They Never Listen": Indigenous River Knowledge and Colonial Misrecognition in Anita Heiss's River of Dreams. *Critical Language and Literary Studies*. Vol. 23, No.38, 2026. doi: https://doi.org/10.48308/clls.2026.245846.1503

Abstract

This article examines Anita Heiss's historical novel Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray (2021), which fictionalizes the Great Flood of Gundagai of 1852, as a critical intervention in blue humanities scholarship on water and relationality. Drawing on Vanessa Watts's concept of Place-Thought and Miranda Fricker's theory of testimonial injustice, the article argues that the novel distinguishes between Wiradyuri river knowledge that is spoken and knowledge that is recognized, showing that repeated warnings issued to settlers before the flood are refused not for lack of clarity but because Wiradyuri epistemic authority over the river has been foreclosed in advance. The resulting catastrophe is read not as natural disaster but as the material outcome of a colonial epistemology structurally unable to recognize Indigenous ecological expertise as expertise. The article contends that River of Dreams does not simply illustrate this relational understanding of water but demonstrates, in human terms, what it costs to theorize relation while refusing to listen to the knowledge already practiced by those who hold it.

Keywords: blue humanities, epistemic injustice, Indigenous water knowledge, River of Dreams, settler colonialism, testimonial injustice

Introduction

When the Marrambidya rose over Gundagai in June 1852, it did not do so without warning. Anita Heiss's Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray (River of Dreams) returns to this documented catastrophe, not to memorialize disaster but to ask why warning, so precisely and repeatedly given, failed so consistently to be heard. That the novel is historical matters beyond accuracy, what survives in the colonial archive as unforeseen calamity, Heiss's fiction discloses as knowledge long held, spoken, and set aside, restoring an interiority documentation never thought worth keeping.

Reading this disclosure calls for a critical vocabulary equipped to take Indigenous environmental knowledge seriously as knowledge, rather than as belief, custom, or local color surrounding a plot. Blue humanities supplies part of that vocabulary, having built an extensive account of how water shapes bodies, histories, and narrative form. Yet the

Copyright© 2026, Critical Language and Literary Studies (CLLS) is published by Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran-Iran. The article is published open-access, and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits copy and redistribute the material just in noncommercial usages as long as the original work is properly cited.

frameworks the field has developed for reading water do not, on their own, settle how the authority of a specific Indigenous knowledge tradition should be recognized within a work of criticism written from outside that tradition. This article asks what happens, at the level of close reading, when *River of Dreams* is read through the frameworks blue humanities makes available, and what the novel's own treatment of Wiradyuri river knowledge demands of those frameworks in turn.

The argument proceeds in three movements. The first, grounded in Vanessa Watts's concept of Place-Thought, Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice, and Kyle Whyte's account of settler colonialism as an ongoing structure, establishes how the novel figures Wiradyuri river knowledge as knowledge in the fullest sense and how its refusal operates as a specific injustice. The second traces that refusal through the novel's central scenes, from practices of naming and reading to the institutional decisions that ignore them. The third turns to the flood and its aftermath, where the attentiveness the colony refused becomes, in Yarri's rescue, the practical knowledge that saves sixty-eight lives. Together, these movements argue that *River of Dreams* does not simply illustrate a blue humanities theme but stages the conditions under which Indigenous water knowledge is heard or refused.

Literature Review

Blue humanities scholarship has, from its founding statements, defined itself against a terrestrial bias in ecocriticism. Steve Mentz argues that Western literary culture has long treated water as an empty corridor between meaningful places on land, and calls instead for water to be read as a formative cultural and material space in its own right (Mentz 2018). Astrida Neimanis extends this into embodiment, arguing that human bodies are always already watery, bound into a wider commons of wet relations that dissolves the bounded self much Western thought depends on (Neimanis 2017, 2, 4).

Blue humanities itself has only recently treated colonialism as a central rather than incidental concern, and the strongest scholarship on Australian settler colonial water injustice has come from adjacent fields, law and political ecology, that this article draws on directly. Burdon, Drew, Stubbs, Webster, and Barber argue Australian water law has failed to incorporate "the meaning and productive capacity of water flows within Indigenous cosmologies," and call on it to unthink its assumptions about who may claim to know a river (Burdon et al. 2015, 334). Hartwig, Jackson, Markham, and Osborne extend this empirically, defining water colonialism as "an enduring political and economic order that perpetuates the expropriation of Indigenous water," and showing how the development of Australia's water resources in this same south eastern region has delivered little benefit to Aboriginal peoples, who remain marginalized from the decisions that shape it (Hartwig et al. 2022, 34). Together, this scholarship establishes that Indigenous water knowledge in Australia has been refused legal and material recognition on well documented grounds.

This shift, from a legal record of refusal to a literary one, is not a shift away from documentation but a shift in its form. *River of Dreams* is historical fiction in the fullest sense, returning to a flood that occurred, in a town that still exists, killing and displacing people whose names appear in the surviving colonial record, and taking as its central event a warning the historical record confirms was given and confirms was ignored. Fiction of this kind does not simply dramatize what the archive contains, it supplies what the archive withholds, the interiority, judgment, and testimony of people the record reduced to a death toll or omitted altogether. Read on these terms, the novel stands beside the legal and political scholarship above not as a departure from it but as a different kind of document, one that preserves in narrative form what an act of refused testimony felt like from the side of the person doing the telling, a dimension no court record or water policy report is built to hold.

It is this kind of document that has, so far, received only a handful of reviews since its release, chiefly in general interest literary outlets rather than in scholarly venues, and no peer reviewed academic article on the novel has yet appeared. One of these reviews is nonetheless worth pausing on. Writing for *Australian Book Review*, a venue for literary criticism rather than academic scholarship, Jane Sullivan notes that the novel poses, through its protagonist's own eyes, the question of why the settlers did not follow her people's advice to build on higher ground (Sullivan 2021). Sullivan's review is not academic, and makes no claim to theoretical framing, but the observation is exact. It names, in a single sentence, the same refusal this article takes as its subject, and does so without any critical apparatus capable of explaining why that refusal happened or what it cost. That a perceptive general reader can sense the novel's central concern without a scholarly framework existing to account for it is itself evidence of the gap. The observation is available. The theory to make sense of it is not.

Taken together, these absences define the gap this article addresses. Indigenous water knowledge in

Australia has been shown to be refused legal and material recognition, while *River of Dreams* has received little critical attention despite centering precisely this problem. Its central concern has been sensed by at least one reviewer but never read through a framework capable of explaining why that refusal occurs or what it costs. This article brings these bodies of scholarship together to read that refusal as a specific and describable form of injustice, rather than a generic failure of communication between cultures.

Theoretical Framework

River of Dreams insists that the Marrambidya be known through the relations of language, movement, ceremony, and obligation that have constituted Wiradyuri understanding of the river across time, and it is this insistence, rather than any argument made on the novel's behalf, that grounds the theoretical apparatus of the present article. Three bodies of theory make that insistence legible on its own terms. Vanessa Watts's concept of Place-Thought supplies its ontological ground, Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice explains the specific mechanism by which Wiradyuri knowledge is refused a hearing, and Kyle Whyte's work on settler colonialism and environmental injustice connects that refusal to the material and historical conditions under which it occurs. Watts defines Place-Thought as "the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated " (Watts 2013, 21). This is not, she insists, a mystical claim but a cosmological and historical one, indigenous frameworks "are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension" of the land's own agency (Watts 2013, 22). The consequence of imposing the Western epistemological-ontological divide onto this framework is therefore not merely a misreading but a colonial operation: it "necessitates a distinction between place and thought" that leaves "land simply dirt and thought only possessed by humans" (Watts 2013, 32), rendering Indigenous knowledge systems unintelligible by criteria they were never designed to meet. Within Place-Thought, by contrast, land and water are not passive environments awaiting human interpretation but are themselves possessed of agency, intention, and meaning — what Watts calls an animacy that "goes beyond being alive or acting" to encompass "thought, desire, contemplation and will" (Watts 2013, 23). Knowledge, in this account, is not produced by abstracting from place but by deepening one's accountability to it, a formulation that resonates directly with the understanding of Country that structures Heiss's novel, in which knowledge of the Marrambidya is inseparable from the language that names it, the movement across Country that reads its signs, the ceremony that honors it, and the obligations that bind the Wiradyuri people to its banks across generations.

Kyle Whyte's account of settler colonialism as an ongoing environmental process gives this architecture its historical traction. Whyte argues settler colonialism functions not as a completed event but a continuing structure that reorganizes ecological relationships to sever Indigenous peoples from the knowledge systems that secured their self-determination, a severance he and Kristie Dotson describe as epistemic dispossession built into the ordinary operation of settler institutions (Whyte 2018, 129; Dotson and Whyte 2013, 60). Read alongside Place-Thought and testimonial injustice, Whyte's work supplies the third term this article needs, an account of why the refusal in *River of Dreams* is structural rather than incidental. The historical and ethnographic record bears this out beyond the single flood the novel depicts. Rose's account of Aboriginal kinship with land and water, Strang's ethnography of Aboriginal communities in Cape York, Goodall's history of Indigenous water knowledge in New South Wales, and Davies, Marshall, and Ridges's property rights analysis each document the durability of the knowledge systems the novel stages as refused. Ruth Morgan's history of sanitary citizenship in interwar Perth, Darwin, and Melbourne extends this pattern into the twentieth century, showing how access to clean freshwater became, in her words, "a means for social inclusion and exclusion in the settler suburbs" along lines of race, and how Aboriginal camps lacking connection to town water supplies were, on that basis, subject to surveillance and eventual removal (Morgan 2024, 70). These five sources are drawn on here as historical and ethnographic context for the novel's setting and its afterlife, not as additional theoretical apparatus, that role is reserved for Watts, Fricker, and Whyte.

What the novel makes equally visible is the specific mechanism by which this form of knowledge is refused rather than simply misunderstood, and it is here that Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice becomes indispensable. Fricker defines the central case of testimonial injustice as "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit," the wrong that occurs when "a speaker receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer" are (Fricker 2007, 28). What makes this concept particularly germane is Fricker's distinction between incidental and systematic testimonial injustice. Where incidental injustice is localized to specific contexts, systematic testimonial injustice is produced by prejudices

that "track the subject through different dimensions of social activity — economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political," rendering the subject "susceptible not only to testimonial injustice but to a gamut of different injustices" (Fricker 2007, 27). Read through this framework, the scenes of warning and dismissal that structure the novel's opening chapters become legible not as dramatizations of cultural misunderstanding but as precise enactments of a colonial epistemological order, one in which the authority of Wiradyuri river knowledge has been foreclosed in advance of any exchange, rendering the disaster that follows not an accident of nature but a consequence of choice. Read together with Whyte's account of settler colonialism as an ongoing structure, Place-Thought and testimonial injustice supply the method of what follows, a close reading of *River of Dreams* attentive to the ontological status the novel grants Wiradyuri river knowledge, the specific mechanisms by which that knowledge is refused a hearing, and the historical conditions that make such refusal durable rather than incidental.

River Knowledge

In *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray*, knowledge of the Marrambidya is never presented as esoteric, intuitive, or spiritually removed from the practical demands of survival. From the novel's opening pages, Heiss insists on the opposite: that Wiradyuri environmental understanding is precise, transmissible, and accumulated through generations of attentive inhabitation of a specific place. What the narrative stages, with increasing urgency, is not the mysteriousness of this knowledge but its legibility, and the kind of refusal required to render it invisible.

The most immediate expression of this precision appears through naming. When Wagadhaany quietly reminds her father that Marrambidya means "big flood, big water," the exchange carries implications that extend well beyond cultural identification. The river's name is archival rather than decorative: it encodes within language itself a historical record of hydrological behavior, preserving across generations the knowledge that this river floods. Deborah Bird Rose, in *Nourishing Terrains*, cites an Aboriginal elder's insistence that "Everything come up out of ground — *language*, people, emu, kangaroo, grass. That's Law" (Rose 1996, 9), a formulation that captures the ontological stakes of Heiss's opening precisely: language is not a representation of the landscape but part of it, carrying within its structure the ecological memory that sustains responsible inhabitation. The scene in which Marrambidya's meaning surfaces makes the stakes of this withheld language unmistakable. When a settler boasts to Yarri of the attic he is building: "we can go up high if there is any flooding, but I'm sure we won't have to." Yarri says nothing. Only once they have walked away does Wagadhaany ask why, and his answer names the logic precisely: "No matter what you say, or how many times you say it... some people, especially White people, they just won't listen." Yarri's silence here is not passivity but foresight. He withholds the very knowledge that could save the man, because he has already learned that offering it changes nothing. The settler's confidence that his attic will keep him safe rests on more than a failure to learn what Marrambidya means. Veracini describes settler colonialism as a process that empties a place of its prior meaning in order to remake it as available space, and that is exactly what happens here, performed by a man who never even hears the word he is building on top of (Veracini 2017, 5). The meaning of Marrambidya is therefore not a piece of cultural information that settlers have failed to acquire; it is environmental knowledge encoded in the most durable of archives sustained only by the continued life of the community that speaks it.

This inseparability of language and place extends throughout the novel into a broader framework of embodied and intergenerational practice. Wagadhaany reflects that what settlers experience as hardship, living with limited shelter and direct exposure to the elements, has been "the life of Wiradyuri people forever," and the novel is careful not to romanticize this as effortless communion with nature; instead it emphasizes accumulated competence, developed through sustained attentiveness to the river's rhythms over timescales settler occupation cannot approximate. Her father's insistence that the Wiradyuri have "prospered and lived in harmony with the bila for many, many, many years" positions the river not as threat to be controlled but as relation to be maintained, and the triple repetition of "many" conveys a duration so vast it exceeds the settler's temporal horizon entirely. Strang, writing of Aboriginal communities in Cape York, observes that Indigenous peoples "moved with water and other ecological flows through time and space," a formulation that captures precisely the quality of environmental practice Heiss depicts, not mastery over the river but attentiveness to it, a mode of inhabitation oriented toward accommodation rather than control (Strang 2013, 189). This is Place-Thought again. Place does not provide the backdrop against which thought occurs but is itself an agent of it, and knowledge becomes possible only through sustained, reciprocal inhabitation rather than abstraction.

It is precisely this understanding that Heiss's novel inhabits as narrative logic rather than philosophical proposition, or as something imposed on it from outside. Heather Goodall describes Indigenous environmental knowledge as a process rather than an archive, continuously renewed through engagement with a living environment rather than fixed once and stored (Goodall 2008, 356). It is precisely this processual, relational quality of Indigenous knowledge that a settler epistemology oriented toward documentation and fixity is structurally ill equipped to recognize as knowledge at all. That structural difference finds its sharpest expression in the novel through the contrast between two kinds of reading. During the flood sequence, Yindyamarra guides others to safety by "reading the landscape," using trees and environmental signs to navigate upstream. His name is itself Wiradyuri for respectful attentiveness, a disciplined listening through which one remains accountable to Country rather than sovereign over it. And the novel frames this capacity through an explicit juxtaposition: "what good is it to read books if you cannot read the land you live on?" The question is not anti-intellectual but epistemological, reading the land demands the same interpretive rigor as reading a text, but grounded in a living, variable environment rather than a fixed one, and it cannot be performed alone. Wagadhaany's recognition that even a low river "is probably still very deep in the middle" derives not from personal observation but from what "the aunties told her," a detail that quietly insists on the communal and custodial structure of environmental literacy. Knowledge of this kind is not discovered individually, it is transmitted relationally, within networks of obligation that bind the knower to other people and to the place itself.

It is this binding, between knowledge, obligation, and place, that the novel's treatment of totemic responsibility makes most explicit. When Yindy explains that "everyone has an animal totem that we protect, and that way, no animal should ever disappear" (Heiss 2021, 208), the statement articulates a conservation ethic grounded in custodial obligation rather than resource management, one in which ecological sustainability emerges not from external regulation but from the internalized responsibilities of individuals within a community. Rose's observation that, within Aboriginal totemic kinship systems, "many non-humans are kin" captures the ethical logic precisely (Rose 2014, 137). At stake is not sentiment but a structural relationship of mutual dependence, in which the wellbeing of species and people are inseparable. The naming of Wagadhaany and Yindyamarra's sons, one after the water dragon, Ngarrang, and the other after the river itself Galari, extends this logic into the most intimate registers of kinship and selfhood. To be named after the river is not metaphor or symbolism; it is the inscription of custodial relationship into the structure of a person's existence, a practice through which belonging to Country is reproduced across generations as lived obligation rather than cultural memory alone.

The figure of the waawii, a water spirit whose presence in the Marrambidya is read through the river's own behavior, draws these threads together most fully, and it is worth pausing on since it might appear, within a Western critical framework, a departure from the practical environmental knowledge discussed above. The novel presents it as anything but a departure. Wagadhaany recalls being taught that the waawii inhabits the Marrambidya and that the sight of water moving "around and around in circles" signals its presence — a warning that functions simultaneously as ecological instruction, cultural transmission, and ethical orientation. The waawii corresponds to what Rose identifies as the Rainbow Serpent, a Dreaming presence "associated with water, especially with permanent waters" (Rose, James, and Watson 2003, 33).

The story does not mystify the river; it teaches it. The waawii narrative directs attention to the river's dangerous currents while cultivating irreducible attentiveness toward its power, a mode of custodial pedagogy inseparable from cultural identity. That Wagadhaany wonders, during the flood itself, what has happened to the waawii is not superstition but a reflex of the relational framework through which she has learned to inhabit the river: one in which the Marrambidya is never simply a body of water but a presence that must be reckoned with and never assumed to be predictable on the basis of present appearance alone. What Wagadhaany's explanation of reciprocity: "Rain is life... if we respect the earth and sky, they will respect us back"(Heiss 2021, 114) ultimately articulates is the ethical principle that underwrites all of these practices: that human flourishing is not separable from the flourishing of the environments within which it is embedded, and that knowledge of those environments carries an obligation of care that cannot be discharged through management or infrastructure. Across the Murray-Darling system of which the Marrambidya is part, custodial groups "exercise stewardship but not ownership over resources such as game or water while they are on their Country, using what they need but no more" (Davies, Marshall, and Ridges 2023, 401). Reciprocity, on this account, is not a sentiment expressed toward the

river but a rule of use, or a limit on extraction built into the structure of obligation itself, and precisely the limit that Bradley's permanent construction on the floodplain refuses to recognize. This knowledge is never hidden. The question the novel poses is not how it failed to reach those who needed it, but what kind of epistemological order renders knowledge so clearly expressed inaudible — the vocabulary for which Fricker's testimonial injustice and Whyte's account of epistemic dispossession supply with precision.

Settler Refusal

This distinction between knowledge heard and knowledge recognized structures the sequence of encounters between Yarri and the settler Henry Bradley that opens the narrative, scenes in which Heiss stages the mechanisms through which a colonial epistemological order forecloses recognition before any exchange takes place. Yarri's first warning is disarmingly simple: "Not a good place to live, Boss, too flat" (Heiss 2021, 9). The statement requires no specialist knowledge, it names an observable feature of the landscape and draws on generations of accumulated experience. What follows, however, is not disagreement but dismissal, and the novel's narrative framing is careful to distinguish between the two. Bradley does not engage with the warning's content, offer a counterargument, or even acknowledge that a claim about the landscape has been made. The warning is registered as noise rather than information, and construction continues. This is testimonial injustice in its purest form, Yarri's credibility is negated not by anything he says but by who he is within the colonial order, and no act of communication can compensate for it.

The second encounter makes this structure undeniable. Standing before the half-constructed house, Yarri translates his knowledge into the most immediate sensory terms available: "Flood area, biggest rains, the water goes past here," raising his hand above his head to demonstrate the height the water can reach (Heiss 2021, 11). The gesture is unambiguous, precise and embodied, requiring no cultural translation. Bradley's response: "You don't know what you're talking about. We need rain. It certainly doesn't look like it's going to flood to me" (Heiss 2021, 11) is therefore not a counter-claim about the river but about Yarri's capacity to know the river at all. The epistemological content of the exchange has shifted, what is being disputed is not the accuracy of a prediction but the legitimacy of a knower. Bradley's confidence rests entirely on the immediate appearance of the dry landscape. Yarri's response: "It hasn't flooded for longest time. It will happen again. We know" (Heiss 2021, 11) grounds environmental understanding in historical recurrence rather than present visibility, and the pronoun "we" is quietly significant, this is not individual intuition but collective, intergenerational knowledge. The irony is complete, the form of knowledge most authoritative about this river, grounded in long custodial inhabitation, is refused recognition at the moment it is most clearly expressed.

Wagadhaany's observation that her people "do not understand the land and river like we do, and they don't care that they should not build on the flat earth there" (Heiss 2021, 13) is precise in a way that rewards attention. The conjunction of "do not understand" and "don't care" is not redundant; it identifies two distinct but related failures. The first is epistemological, settlers lack the environmental knowledge that sustained inhabitation of Country produces. The second is ethical, and more damning; it suggests the absence of understanding is not innocent. To not care whether one understands the land is to refuse the relational obligations that, within a Wiradyuri framework, constitute responsible inhabitation. Davies et al., writing on Aboriginal water ontologies in the Murray-Darling Basin more broadly, observe that within Aboriginal frameworks "the human, natural and spiritual worlds are not separate domains" and that rights and obligations are held reciprocally between people and the more-than-human world rather than flowing unidirectionally from human actors toward passive resources (Davies, Marshall, and Ridges 2023, 397). The permanence of Bradley's structures, unable to be moved when the water rises, is not merely a practical failure but an ontological statement, that landscape must accommodate settlement, not the reverse.

Heiss refuses, however, to confine this epistemological failure to individual encounters between Yarri and Bradley. The novel's most structurally important move is its demonstration that settler refusal is not a personal disposition but a systemic one, reproduced through colonial institutions that operate according to the same logic at the level of governance as Bradley does at the level of the floodplain. When settlers petition Governor Gipps to relocate the town following the flood of 1844, recognizing the site's environmental unsuitability, the Colonial Secretary's response is dismissive in a register that echoes Bradley's almost exactly: they had bought the land "for better or worse," and the matter is settled (Heiss 2021, 24). The episode is structurally significant: it embeds this refusal in a colonial administrative framework that

subordinates ecological reality to the imperatives of property and settlement. What Whyte terms *vicious sedimentation*: the process by which repeated settler impositions onto Indigenous landscapes "fortify settler ignorance against Indigenous peoples over time" (Whyte 2018, 138) finds its most concentrated illustration here. Epistemic injustice of this kind, as Sultana argues, is "not incidental but systemic" (Sultana 2025, 9), the same logic that refuses Yarri's knowledge of the floodplain reproduced, at the level of colonial policy, in the refusal to act on the settlers' own belated recognition of environmental risk. Wagadhaany's closing observation, "My babiin was right. None of them ever listen" (Heiss 2021, 24), binds these encounters together into a single pattern of institutional deafness that operates across scales, from the individual exchange to the colonial administration.

The Flood and Its Aftermath

The novel's most searching exploration of settler epistemology, however, comes not in these moments of explicit refusal but in the persistence of the same logic after catastrophe has already occurred. Even as the ruins of Gundagai bear witness to the accuracy of every warning Yarri offered, James Bradley imagines that relocation to Wagga Wagga will provide a "flood-proof" future (Heiss 2021, 92). David's immediate reminder that the Murrumbidgee runs downstream through Wagga Wagga and beyond, making the search for absolute hydrological security an illusion (Heiss 2021, 64), goes unheeded. The exchange reveals that settler thinking rests not on ignorance but on a conviction that any failure of mastery over landscape is a technical problem to be solved by relocation, not a consequence of inhabiting land on terms it cannot sustain. This is the deepest form of refusal the novel diagnoses: not the refusal to hear a warning, but the refusal to let experience itself produce the knowledge that sustained inhabitation of Country has already made available.

When the Marrambidya finally rises in June 1852, overwhelming Gundagai and claiming between eighty and a hundred lives, the novel resists framing the disaster as either natural catastrophe or divine retribution: the former implies unpredictability, the latter moral design. What Heiss insists upon instead is something more unsettling: the flood is the material enactment of knowledge that was already possessed, already spoken, and deliberately set aside. "We should have moved to higher ground already," David Bradley reflects in the flood's aftermath, "when we had the chance. This is history repeating itself" (Heiss 2021, 91). The admission reveals the temporal structure of colonial environmental failure: the flood of 1852 was not the first, the warnings were not new, the knowledge was not hidden. What the disaster materializes is the accumulated weight of refusal, forcing the colonial epistemological order to reckon with the consequences of its own structural deafness.

The town the flood leaves behind is rendered with an attention to material detail that reinforces this reading. "The town has almost disappeared. The buildings, the shops, everything gone. It's no longer a town but a shell" (Heiss 2021, 44). What has been washed away is not simply infrastructure but the entire material logic of colonial settlement: the permanent structures, the fixed addresses, the stone and timber that announced settler permanence on a floodplain the Wiradyuri had always known to be temporary. The broken doll Wagadhaany finds on the footpath: "naked, caught in between some rocks," its porcelain face cracked, its clothes ripped away by the force of the water (Heiss 2021, 44), condenses this loss into a single image of shocking vulnerability. The object that was meant to be permanent has been dissolved by the river's indifference to the categories of ownership and settlement that produced it. The Marrambidya has not been moved by the settlers' confidence in their own permanence, and the wreckage it leaves is a record of that confidence's cost.

Rescue and Its Costs

The novel's most searching ethical argument, however, does not reside in the destruction but in what happens within it. As the flood reaches its height, Yarri and Jacky Jacky take to the river in a bark canoe, pulling survivors from rooftops and treetops in a rescue that will save sixty-eight lives between them. Yarri's motivation is rendered with quiet force: "All he cares about is that a human life is a human life, and all he wants to do is save as many people as he can" (Heiss 2021, 33). The simplicity of the formulation is deliberate. Against the epistemological and social hierarchy that has structured every prior interaction between Wiradyuri and settlers, the flood produces a radical leveling."A naked White man and a barely clothed Black man are nothing but two men stuck in the midst of a devastating flood," Yarri reflects. "He knows he has the power to save this man's life. A life is a life" (Heiss 2021, 34). What Yarri enacts is not forgiveness or the suspension of political understanding, but a relational ethic so deeply embedded that it operates independently of conditions that have failed to reciprocate it, grounded in the same custodial responsibilities that bind Wiradyuri

people to Country and to all who move through it. The rescue is the novel's most concentrated demonstration of what relational accountability looks like in practice: an obligation that does not discriminate, does not calculate, and does not wait for recognition before it acts.

The colonial response to this heroism is instructive in its inadequacy. Yarri and Jacky Jacky are awarded brass medallions at a public ceremony, their names spoken with gratitude before a crowd that nevertheless maintains its racial distances: "the Black people and Whites standing some distance away from each other" even as they celebrate the men who saved White lives (Heiss 2021, 55). Wagadhaany's reflection on this ceremony is precise and bitter: the breastplates "will not keep them warm from the frost that continues to settle in each night and early morning" (Heiss 2021, 56). The gap between symbolic recognition and material obligation could not be more starkly drawn. What the settlers offer is acknowledgment without accountability; the performance of gratitude that leaves every structural condition of Wiradyuri dispossession exactly in place. Yarri and Jacky Jacky are seen and thanked; what remains unseen is everything the colonial order owes them as a consequence. Recognition, the novel insists, is not a feeling but a practice, and the brass medallion is its hollow substitute.

The death of Long Jimmy crystallizes this argument with a finality that the novel's ethical framework does not permit to be absorbed quietly. Having exposed himself to the bitter winter cold during the rescue, Jimmy falls ill and cannot recover. The medicine his people need grows on land that has been enclosed by settlers, land they are no longer permitted to enter: "The medicine we needed was on land Whites are building on, we dared not go there, we are not welcome there. We couldn't help him. And now he is gone" (Heiss 2021, 60). What Heiss is describing maps onto what Kyle Whyte identifies as a defining ecological operation of settler colonialism, the erasure of "the particular systems of interdependent relationships of humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems that matter to many Indigenous peoples" (Whyte 2017, 213). Long Jimmy does not die from exposure alone, he dies because colonial reorganization of Country has severed the relationship between knowledge and place that gives custodial practice its force, the land that held the medicine has been enclosed, the knowledge of how to use it persists, but the system of responsibilities that makes it available has been broken. What Sultana terms epistemic loss finds its most material expression here — not merely the dismissal of Indigenous knowledge but the active dismantling of the relational infrastructure through which knowledge sustains life — what Sultana describes as the erasure of "lifeways rooted in kinship, spirituality and relation to land" (Sultana 2025, 2). Wagadhaany's anger is not grief displaced into politics; it is a precise diagnosis. "A heroic man who was out saving the lives of White people in a country where White people did not value his Wiradyuri life at all" (Heiss 2021, 60). The sentence holds the novel's central irony without flinching: the relational ethic that moved Yarri and Jimmy to save settler lives is met, in the end, with the same epistemological and territorial refusal that produced the disaster in the first place. The river did not discriminate. The colony did, fatally, and to the last.

What allows Yarri to act with such force, undiscriminating and unconditional, is not a suspension of his own knowledge but its fullest exercise. Yindyamarra, the practice of disciplined, accountable listening that guided the flood sequence's navigation earlier, is not a private virtue exercised apart from the river, it is the same attentiveness that reads the water now directing a bark canoe toward the next rooftop. This is Place-Thought in practice rather than proposition, Watts's claim that place is itself an agent of thought made visible in the embodied decisions a rescue like this demands. The same custodial relationship to the Marrambidya that Bradley dismissed as superstition, and that colonial administration dismissed as irrelevant to a land dispute, is what saves sixty eight lives when the river Bradley refused to hear finally arrives. Knowledge the colonial order treated as noise is, in the end, the only knowledge capable of answering the flood.

Conclusion

To read *River of Dreams* attentively is to become aware of a particular kind of irony that accumulates across its pages with the slow pressure of floodwater: that the knowledge most needed was never absent, never obscure, never withheld. It was spoken, gestured, embodied in the name of the river itself. What was absent, catastrophically, structurally, and with consequences that the novel measures in bodies, was not knowledge but the willingness to receive it as such. This distinction, between the failure of knowledge and the failure of recognition, is the sharpest edge of Heiss's argument, and the one that cuts deepest into blue humanities as a critical formation. For a field whose central ambition is disorientation from "controlling heights" (Mentz 2018, 70), the novel issues a precise challenge, the disorientation blue humanities performs theoretically was already per-

formed historically, at enormous human cost, by the Marrambidya itself, and the people who moved with it were not invited to speak when it mattered most.

Yindyamarra, the Wiradyuri practice of accountable listening at work throughout the novel, names what the preceding sections have shown, that knowledge of the Marrambidya was never information the settlers lacked but a relationship they refused to enter, structuring both Wagadhaany's silence before Bradley and Yarri's rescue of the people who had never offered that same attentiveness in return.

This has a direct bearing on how blue humanities might read a novel like this one. The field's own claim, that human bodies and environments are constituted through watery relation rather than bounded separation, is not a discovery this novel needs blue humanities to supply, it is a relationship Wiradyuri custodial practice has maintained across generations of inhabiting the Marrambidya. What *River of Dreams* contributes is not a new theory of water but a demonstration of what it costs, in human lives, to theorize relation while refusing to listen to those who already live it. The Marrambidya is never absent from this novel, it is named, storied, and honored from the first page to the last. What varies across its historical arc is not the river's presence but the colony's willingness to be accountable to the knowledge that presence demands.

River of Dreams is grounded in documented history, and its historicity is itself a theoretical act: by granting Wagadhaany interiority, her yindyamarra-bound silence and her reading of the river's warnings, Heiss returns to the archive what was always there but rendered inaudible. The river in this novel is neither symbol nor metaphor nor posthuman agent. It is a living archive of colonial history, a site where knowledge was produced, transmitted, refused, and ultimately vindicated. What it archives is not only the flood of 1852 but the structure of refusal that made it inevitable, and the structure of attentiveness that survived it. To read this novel as a contribution to blue humanities is therefore to accept the field's own most searching challenge. To listen, not metaphorically but practically, to the custodial knowledge that rivers carry and that the people who belong to them have never stopped offering, even to those who could not yet hear what the water already knew.

Funding
There is no funding support.

Authors' Contributions
The authors have written the article in complete collaboration.

Conflict of Interest
This article does not conflict with personal and/or organizational interests

Acknowledging the use of Generative AI
In preparing this essay authors used Claude, Sonnet 5 in order to improve the general language fluency of the text. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

References

1. Burdon, Peter, Georgina Drew, Matthew Stubbs, Adam Webster, and Marcus Barber. 2015. "Decolonising Indigenous Water 'Rights' in Australia: Flow, Difference, and the Limits of Law." *Settler Colonial Studies* 5 (4): 334–49.
2. Davies, Siobhan, Graham R. Marshall, and Malcolm Ridges. 2023. "A Property Rights Schema for Cultural Flows in the Murray Darling Basin, Australia." *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 30 (3–4): 393–415.
3. Dotson, Kristie, and Kyle Whyte. 2013. "Environmental Justice, Unknowability and Unqualified Affectability." *Ethics and the Environment* 18 (2): 55–79.
4. Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Goodall, Heather. 2008. "Riding the Tide: Indigenous Knowledge, History and Water in a Changing Australia." *Environment and History* 14 (3): 355–84.
6. Hartwig, Lana D., Sue Jackson, Francis Markham, and Natalie Osborne. 2022. "Water Colonialism and Indigenous Water Justice in South Eastern Australia." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 38 (1): 30–63.
7. Heiss, Anita. 2021. *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray: River of Dreams*. E-book. Sydney: Simon & Schuster Australia.
8. Mentz, Steve. 2018. "Blue Humanities." In *Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, 69–72. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
9. Morgan, Ruth A. 2024. "Sanitary Citizenship in the Settler Colonial City: Race, Health, and Hygiene in Interwar Urban Australia." In *Critical Approaches to the Australian Blue Humanities*, edited by Claire Hansen and Maxine Newlands. Abingdon: Routledge.
10. Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Environmental Cultures. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
11. Rose, Deborah Bird. 1996. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission.
12. Rose, Deborah Bird. 2014. "Death and Grief in a World of Kin." In *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, edited by Graham Harvey, 137–47. Routledge.
13. Rose, Deborah Bird, Diana James, and Christine Watson. 2003. *Indigenous Kinship with the Natural World in NSW*. Hurstville: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.
14. Strang, Veronica. 2013. "Conceptual Relations: Water, Ideologies, and Theoretical Subversions." In *Thinking with Water*, edited by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, 185–211. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
15. Sullivan, Jane. 2021. "Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray by Anita Heiss." *Australian Book Review*, no. 432, June. https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2021/june-2021-no-432/jane-sullivan-reviews-bila-yarrudhanggalangdhuray-by-anita-heiss
16. Sultana, Farhana. 2025. "Repairing Epistemic Injustice and Loss in the Era of Climate Coloniality." *Geo: Geography and Environment* 12: e70029.
17. Veracini, Lorenzo. 2017. "Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination." In *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, edited by Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, 1–8. Abingdon: Routledge.
18. Watts, Vanessa. 2013. "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2 (1): 20–34.
19. Whyte, Kyle. 2018. "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice." *Environment and Society* 9 (1): 125–44.
20. Whyte, Kyle Powys. 2017. "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene." In *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, 206–15. Abingdon: Routledge.