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The Powerful Presence of Dams in Appalachian Poetry

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

at East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2020

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Keywords: Appalachia, TVA, Dam, Power, Tennessee, North Carolina, Poetry

ABSTRACT

The Powerful Presence of Dams in Appalachian Poetry

by

Zoë Hester

Contemporary Appalachian poetry offers a lens through which we can see the immense impact that the Tennessee Valley Authority has had in Appalachia. In this thesis, I explore the powerful presence of dams in Appalachian poetry by analyzing three poems. Jesse Graves's "The Road into the Lake" centers on personal and familial loss, Jackson Wheeler's "The TVA Built a Dam" mourns the loss of communities, and Rose McLarney's "Imminent Domain" focuses on the ecological destruction that has occurred in Appalachia and around the globe as the result of the construction of TVA dams. Ultimately, all three poems serve as eulogies of time, land, and lives that have been stolen, offering warnings against further ecological and societal desecration.

DEDICATION

To all of the people
who have lost their homes
to rising waters

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to the people who helped me complete this project: to Dr. O'Donnell and Dr. Wessels, thank you for tackling this project with me and for all of your valuable feedback and time. To Dr. Holmes, thank you for speaking with me and offering your feedback a *multitude* of times.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What is Appalachian Poetry?

To answer this question, we first need to answer another one: *what is Appalachia?* This question has puzzled historians, sociologists, and writers for centuries. In her book *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, Elizabeth Catte writes, “Appalachia is, often simultaneously, a political construction, a vast geographic region, and a spot that occupies an unparalleled place in our cultural imagination,” but that “[m]aintaining flexible definitions of Appalachia is appropriate” because of the tensions among these elements (Catte 10, 67). It is difficult to define Appalachia, but it is much easier to define what it is not. Appalachia is not inhabited only by poor hillbillies who speak broken or outdated English. It is not a place where everyone is straight, white, racist, and Baptist. It is not some “other America”; Appalachia is America. Its people share the same struggles as other Americans. However, the culture of Appalachia is unique in many ways, and Appalachian history, while similar to that of other places oppressed by capitalism, is unique as well. This Appalachian identity and history help to define the region, however flexibly, as well as defining its artforms. The Tennessee Valley Authority influences the way poets perceive and write about the region, just as it has immensely altered the history of Appalachia.

A Brief History of the TVA

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created during the Roosevelt administration in 1933. Its mission was

[t]o improve the navigability and to provide for the flood control of the Tennessee River; to provide for reforestation and the proper use of marginal lands in the Tennessee Valley;

to provide for the agricultural and industrial development of said valley; to provide for the national defense by the creation of a corporation for the operation of Government properties at and near Muscle Shoals in the State of Alabama, and for other purposes.

(Tennessee Valley Authority Act)

The TVA was established with the intention of reducing the impact of the Great Depression in southern Appalachia, “where it was tasked with improving the quality of life in the region” (“Our History”). In the *Tennessee Blue Book*’s early twentieth century history of Tennessee, the office of the Tennessee Secretary of State credits the persistence of Nebraska U.S. Senator George Norris with the TVA’s creation; the first TVA dam would later be named after the Senator (Hargett 531). In *The Heartland Series*’ documentary *For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*, Senator Norris is presented as an anti-capitalist progressive,

Norris was a liberal republican from Nebraska, and he supported the ideals of President Franklin Roosevelt. He was decidedly anti-big business, which also dove tailed with much of Roosevelt’s New Deal. The creation of TVA was a direct result of Senator Norris’s legislative action to prevent Henry Ford from leasing an unfinished federal dam and two nitrate plants on the Tennessee River in Alabama. . . . Norris didn’t trust Ford or any plan by the private sector. Still, he wanted the dam and the nitrate plants operational.

(For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80)

The TVA was a progressive project for its time, and as part of FDR’s New Deal, was in fact considered too socialist by many Americans. In the same documentary, it is stated that “. . . from the start, [the TVA] encountered resistance. Many believed the government, by forming TVA, was forcing out private business. Political opponents fought tooth and nail against what they believed to be socialism” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). Despite this resistance,

“Norris’s determination combined with Roosevelt’s New Deal goals of government operated social and jobs programs helped create the TVA Act that passed to Congress” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*).

The TVA initially sought to fulfil its purpose of completely developing the Tennessee River System for the greater good “by building hydroelectric dams (20 between 1933 and 1951) and several coal-fired power plants to produce electricity” (Hargett 531). The TVA intended to improve the quality of life in lower Appalachia by powering the region with hydroelectricity;

[i]nexpensive and abundant electrical power was the main benefit that TVA brought to Tennessee, particularly in rural areas that previously did not have electrical service. TVA electrified some 60,000 farm households across the state. By 1945 TVA was the largest electrical utility in the nation, a supplier of vast amounts of power whose presence in Tennessee attracted large industries to relocate near one of its dams or steam plants. (Hargett 531)

While the federal government viewed its vision of a valley authority as revolutionary and potentially depression-ending, not all Appalachians welcomed the idea of this grand industrial vision;

[t]he “Agrarians” at Vanderbilt University celebrated the region’s agricultural heritage and challenged the wisdom of moving rural people aside to make room for modern development. Donald Davidson [an Appalachian writer], in particular, objected to massive government land acquisitions that displaced communities and flooded some of the best farmland in the valley. TVA, for example, purchased or condemned 1.1 million acres of land, flooded 300,000 acres, and moved the homes of 14,000 families in order to build its first 16 dams. (Hargett 532)

Despite protests by the Agrarians and other Appalachians and Southerners, the TVA built its first dam and continued to extensively construct other structures throughout the Tennessee River System; “[a]gainst the backdrop of World War II, TVA launched one of the largest hydropower construction programs ever undertaken in the United States” (“Our History”). The office of the Tennessee Secretary of State explains, “[f]or Tennessee, World War II constituted a radical break with the past. TVA had transformed the physical landscape of the state, and wartime industrialism had irreversibly changed the economy” (Hargett 533). Following the post-war economic growth in America, the TVA ventured past hydroelectric and small weir dams and began to build nuclear plants to “spur innovation” in the region (“Our History”). After a brief fallout with nuclear energy, the TVA would continue to expand its creation of power later in the twentieth century; “[w]ith power demand growing, TVA turned its attention back to clean nuclear energy, returning an idled reactor to service, and paving the way to finish construction of another. [The TVA] also launched the first green power program in the Southeast” (“Our History”). Today, the Authority remains a key energy provider, employer, and center of recreation throughout multiple states in Appalachia.

This reader-friendly version of the TVA’s history is the one known by most people who live outside of Appalachia, but it does not tell the whole story of the Authority. Catte writes, [a] desire to “tame” Appalachians for the benefit of industry often lurked behind twentieth-century theories of Appalachian “otherness.” Although industrialists deployed region-specific narratives to justify the development of Appalachia, widely held attitudes about the social position of the poor aided them in this. (Catte 42)

While the Tennessee Valley Authority is certainly progressive, and even socialist, in its origin, some Appalachians like Catte believe that the federal government’s attempt to better Appalachia

was rooted in the same desires as logging, coal mining, and mountain-top removal: capital. She writes that “[n]arratives of dependency conceal the uneven distribution of wealth that haunts Appalachia and indeed, much of the nation” (Catte 13-14). The history of exploitation in Appalachia goes beyond that of the TVA, and it has often been disguised as heartfelt attempts to bring the poor, backwards Appalachians into a more futuristic and inherently better America.

Catte explains:

[p]eople in power use and recycle these strategies not because it’s enjoyable to read lurid tales of a pathological “other”—although that certainly informs part of the allure—but because they are profitable. And if you trace a flawed narrative about Appalachia back far enough, you’ll often find someone making a profit. (Catte 35-36)

Catte further explains that the outsiders who interfere with the well-being of Appalachians, whether they be loggers or dam-builders, have an ultimate prize in their line of vision: “the accumulation of personal wealth in the name of modernization and progress” (Catte 36).

Through ventures like the Tennessee Valley Authority, the United States Government and large corporations have been able to frame a friendly narrative of their own actions in Appalachia. The TVA is an odd organization; as an authority, it is neither an independent corporation nor a true part of the federal government. While this strange Authority created a narrative that the construction of dams and other projects were for the greater good, many Appalachians have witnessed a more sinister side to this history. On the TVA website, the Authority states, “TVA would build dams to transform the poverty-stricken, often-flooded Valley into a modern, electrified and developed slice of America. It also provided TVA with an identity and a vision and that drives the company today” (“Building a Better Life for the Tennessee Valley”). The positive energy of this official statement contrasts starkly with parallel ideas in *What You Are*

Getting Wrong about Appalachia; “[t]he government framed the relocation of farmers as a benevolent process that would move residents geographically, but also temporally, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century” (Catte 74). While both versions offer the same end goal of a new and improved Appalachia, the TVA’s statement attempts to present a friendlier motive than Catte’s. Historically, other Americans and the US government have viewed Appalachians as backwards and simple people, falsely believing that these attributes are what led mountain people to live in the poverty that outsiders felt needed fixing and giving them a reason to step in and “fix” things.

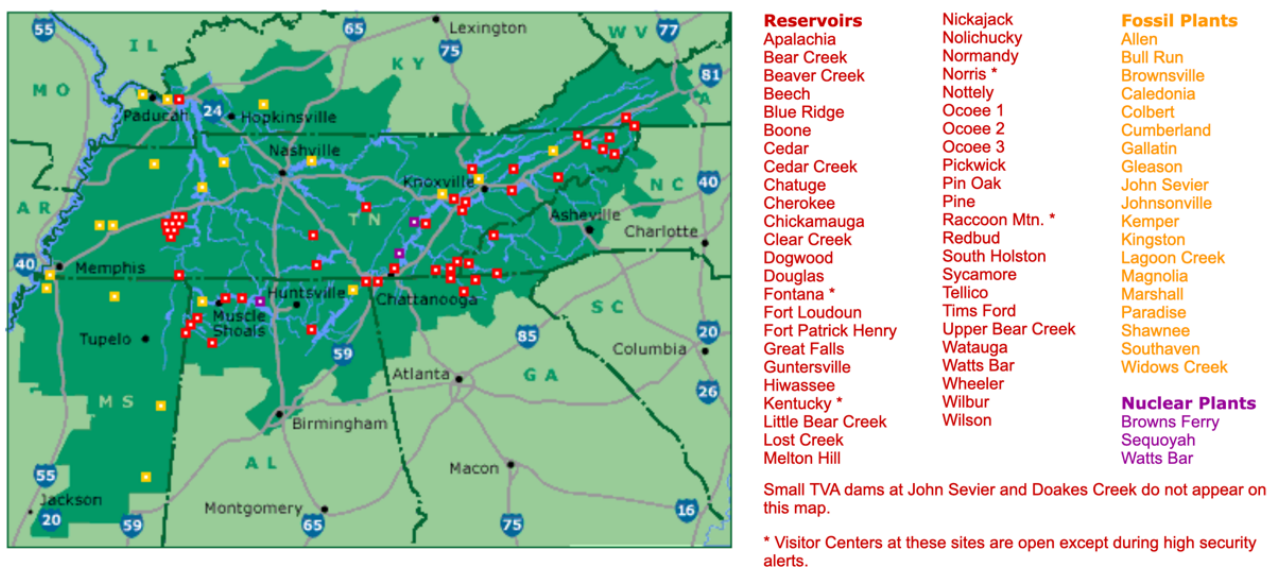


Fig 1: TVA Facilities Map

Despite the TVA’s far-reaching impact, as seen in this present-day TVA Facilities map, some Appalachians have continued the Agrarians’ distrust of the US government’s alphabet soup. Harry M. Caudill (who would grow to be less invested in the fate of all Appalachians later in his life) writes of this inherent distrust and frustration in “O, Appalachia!” saying, “The Tennessee Valley Authority pioneered in an area with few rich vested interests to offend while

the equally destitute hill people were never considered for a federally mandated Appalachian Mountain Authority” (Caudill 526). Caudill poses an important question; why was the authority over Appalachia’s well-being not given to the Appalachian people? Why was authority created by and given to outsiders? Some Tennesseans, North Carolians, and Georgians appreciate the progressive impact that the Tennessee Valley Authority has had on the history and development of the region, while others continue to hold the Agrarians’ grudge against outside industrialization and control, but ultimately, “[i]n one way or another, TVA has an impact on the lives of nearly all Tennesseans” and other Appalachians (Hargett 531).

Introduction of the Poems

Since the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the early twentieth century, dams have provided jobs and energy to the people of Appalachia, but they have also scarred both the landscape of Appalachia and the lives of the people who have called the mountains and valleys home. The presence of the TVA dams has seeped into the minds of Appalachian writers, and thus it often surges into the poetry of the mountains. In this thesis, I explore the powerful presence of dams in Appalachian poetry by analyzing three poems: Jesse Graves’s “The Road into the Lake,” Jackson Wheeler’s “The TVA Built a Dam,” and Rose McLarney’s “Imminent Domain.” Published in 2011, 1993, and 2014, these three poems represent a diverse selection of contemporary Appalachian poetry. Graves, Wheeler, and McLarney write from three different generational perspectives. Jesse Graves, born in 1973, “grew up in Sharps Chapel, Tennessee, about 40 miles north of Knoxville” (*Jesse Graves Poetry*); Jackson Wheeler was born in Andrews, North Carolina in 1953 and passed away in 2017 (Diskin); Rose McLarney was born in Franklin, North Carolina in 1982. While McLarney, a Millennial, Graves, Generation X, and Wheeler, a Baby Boomer, do represent a diverse range of generational attitudes and places, they

in no way represent the diversity of Appalachia as a whole, which is so often mistakenly stereotyped as poor and white. People of color, progressive people, young people, and LGBTQ folk are often excluded from the dialogue about Appalachia. Catte writes that “intentional omission of these voices fits a long tradition of casting Appalachia as a monolithic ‘other America’” (Catte 9). In creating this monolithic Appalachia, we also ignore “the region’s history of indigenous colonization and the continued marginalization of Native American individuals both within Appalachia and the wider United States” (Catte 123). While McLarney, Graves, and Wheeler do not represent Appalachia’s diversity in their race or socio-economic backgrounds, I do believe that these three authors represent Appalachia in other ways through their voices, which differ in generation (and how far removed they are from the initial acts of the TVA) and gender, as well as their writing styles.

In addition to constructing careful analyses of these works, I have researched the history of the TVA and its impact on the communities in these poems, specifically in Norris, Tennessee, and Fontana, North Carolina. We see the immense impact of the TVA in different ways in each of these poems; “The Road into the Lake” centers on personal and familial loss, “The TVA Built a Dam” mourns the loss of communities, and “Imminent Domain” focuses on the ecological destruction that has occurred in Appalachia and around the globe as the result of the construction of dams. Ultimately, all three poems serve as eulogies of time, land, and lives that have been stolen, offering warnings against further ecological and societal desecration.

A Personal Note on Norris, Tennessee, and Appalachia

I grew up in Tennessee’s first electric town, and, as a child, I could see and understand that the dam itself was not natural, but I never imagined that the lake was not. Lakes were just lakes; they represented nothing sinister or sad to me. By the time I was a student in Norris in the

early 2000s, history teachers replaced personal stories like those of the speakers in “The Road into the Lake” and “The TVA Built a Dam” with words that showcased the dams as something of which we were to be proud (continuing a long line of TVA propaganda that originated in the form of showtunes): Norris was the first electric city! The dams gave people jobs! The dams still bring people jobs! The dams brought Tennessee out of the depression! The dams provide clean energy! Perhaps these propagandist statements are true to a point, but my teachers never talked about the negative consequences brought upon Appalachians by the construction of the TVA dams. We celebrated Norris Dam just as we celebrated Norris Dam State Park, never questioning where the land for the park came from. In *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, Catte reveals that her family’s land, like that of the speaker in “The Road into the Lake,” was seized by the government for the progress that the Authority was to bring to what is now Norris and other surrounding communities:

Most of Loyston proper is now at the bottom of a man-made lake—sometimes called the Loyston Sea—created by the TVA’s Norris Dam project in 1936. My great-grandfather’s land, however, was not submerged. Finding itself with surplus land, the government transferred ownership to the State of Tennessee for the creation of a state park at the site of the new lake. This was consistent with the government’s broad aim to put sub-marginal land into the service of the public good. The problem, of course, was that the government had the sole authority to determine the definition of “sub-marginal.” (Catte 72)

Catte goes on to explain that many of the Appalachians who once lived on the land that is now either a state park or underwater “believed that the government, through selective photographic documentation and biased sociological studies, intentionally created a narrative that suited its

purpose” of seizing and controlling the land (Catte 73). Catte writes that despite this loss, her family was “fortunate” and that “[b]eyond Tennessee, some families met a much darker fate,” as can be seen in each poem analyzed in this work (Catte 73).

The TVA remains incredibly proud of both Norris Dam (as well as its other projects) and my hometown of Norris, which the TVA website describes as “an American ideal” and a “Brave New World” (“Norris: An American Ideal”). The immediate purpose of my hometown “was to house the workers building Norris Dam four miles away on the Clinch River” (“Norris: An American Ideal”), but the town also aimed to create a vision of functioning cooperative living for fellow Americans. Although the US government sold Norris in 1948 (“Norris: An American Ideal”), pieces of the TVA’s history remain scattered throughout the city. My middle school was the original Norris High School, which “was once the largest electrically heated structure in the entire world” (“Norris: An American Ideal”). The Sunday school building at my childhood Methodist Church was originally a dormitory for TVA workers; when my friends and I would play hide and seek in it as children, we were frightened by sounds in the attic and hoped that they were not the ghosts of dead laborers sent to haunt us.

Squirrels were the only beings haunting my Sunday school building, but the ghosts created by the Tennessee Valley Authority are still roaming throughout the Tennessee River System from Paducah, Kentucky to the Blue Ridge Dam in northern Georgia. The Tennessee Valley Authority is not limited to the state in its name; the impact of the TVA can be found across contemporary Appalachia, but it is in no way the only defining event within Appalachian heritage. In his 1973 essay “Appalachian Values,” Loyal Jones, who “served as Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College from 1970-1993” (*Berea*), writes:

[o]ur origins, our history, and our experience have made us Southern Mountaineers different in many ways from most other Americans. The Appalachian value system that influences attitudes and behavior is different by our fellow countrymen, although it seems clear that it is similar to the value system of any earlier America. (Jones 508)

In Jones's analysis of what he considers the values of Appalachian people, he writes specifically of "Love of Place," saying, Appalachian "folksongs tell of our regard for the land where we were born. It is one of the unifying values of mountain people, this attachment to one's place, and it is a great problem to those who urge mountaineers to find their destiny outside the mountains" (Jones 512-13). Like traditional mountain folksongs, mountain poetry often celebrates the natural beauty of Appalachia, and poets are quick to criticize themselves and the outside world in the light of problems entering from beyond the mountains. Jones recognizes that Appalachians are not innocent in regard to acts of desecration like mountain top removal or the construction of dams; he writes,

[w]e [Appalachians] have been so close to the frontier with its exploitive mentality, that we have seen our resources squandered, and we have seen our neighbors exploited without our giving these acts much thought In our modest way, we have watched, have not accepted responsibility, and problems have closed in on us. (Jones 516)

While I would argue that Appalachians did not have the power to truly fight against the federal government, this theme of passive regret runs throughout Appalachian poems about the TVA, and it is also found in Appalachian works concerning coal, mountain top removal, and loss of biodiversity. At its core, this regional regret is focalized on acts that have desecrated the natural beauty and bounty of the mountains. These acts of desecration would eventually push Appalachia to a place of poverty: both perceived by the rest of the nation and very real to those

living in the mountains and their foothills. Jones writes that “[o]ur love of place sometimes keeps us in places where there is no hope of maintaining decent lives” (Jones 516). This deep-rooted love of place is visible in “The Road into the Lake,” “The TVA Built a Dam,” and “Imminent Domain,” despite the consequences brought upon the mountains by organizations like the TVA.

When I was little, maybe six or seven years old, my best friend’s dad, a TVA engineer, took us inside Norris Dam—this was pre-9/11, after which security regulations became much less relaxed. I remember feeling terror grow inside of me as we went further and further into this structure and began walking underneath the lake. I remember staring up at the massive turbines and wondering what on earth we could do with so much power. In *For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*, this question of power is not even posed. It is assumed that we are better off with the electricity provided by the TVA;

[t]oday, for better or worse, our civilization and culture simply could not function without electrical power. Just eighty years ago, within the living memory of many people, electrical power was practically unknown in rural Tennessee. In the entire state, about 2% of rural inhabitants had access to it. (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*)

But for many, this power did not come until decades after the dams’ constructions; “the price of the power might be low, but the cost to other parts of their lives was very high” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). Power is an essential part of the stories of the speakers in these three poems; those who hold power can create more power; those who are left without it are forced to relinquish their history and their homes. Ultimately, men that hold power hold the ability to desecrate the earth and change the trajectory of history.

A Note on Mankind

Throughout this thesis, I refer to the human race as “mankind” and use masculine pronouns to describe the possessions and actions of our species. I have made this choice intentionally, as we can trace mankind’s acts of environmental desecration through the history of Western capitalism, colonialism, and consumerism that has been fueled by patriarchal societies.

CHAPTER 2

THE TVA AND SEVERANCE FROM PERSONAL HISTORY IN JESSE GRAVES'S "THE ROAD INTO THE LAKE"

In Jesse Graves's "The Road into the Lake" (2011), the speaker laments for the lost world underneath Norris Lake. The poem centers around the personal grief of the speaker in a way that "The TVA Built a Dam" and "Imminent Domain" do not. In "The Road into the Lake," the speaker tries to imagine what the community beneath Norris Lake would have been like before the TVA seized the land in the Great Depression Era for the construction of its first dam (completed in 1936), noting that his family were some of the people who used to live in the valley. Despite the years that have passed and the water that has risen since the construction of Norris Dam, the speaker feels an immense connection to the land beneath the water's surface. It is ironic that TVA's website claims it is celebrating "TVA Dams Built for the People since 1936" when works such as Graves's poem suggest that the people did not want anything to do with the interference of the Tennessee Valley Authority ("Norris"); the speaker of this poem blames the TVA for the displacement of his family and the loss of what would have been his inheritance. The speaker's experience is not uncommon; in the construction of Norris Dam, "[a]bout 3,000 families, an estimated 14,000 people and homesteads would have to leave their homes forever. And yet, many did so willingly, or at least with a high sense of purpose. When last they turned their back on their homes, they all agreed it was indeed for the greater good" (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). Marshall Wilson was charged with removing families from the valley that would be flooded by Norris Lake: "[t]he understanding and compassion of Wilson made a big difference for the families enduring this personal pain, all for a promise of progress that would eventually cover the landscape with new and powerful crosses

that loom near their loved ones” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). Ultimately, out of over 3,000 families that were asked to move for the greater good, “only five had to be evicted by force” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). These remaining families were not given the choice to stay or to leave; Wilson stated, “[w]e did not have time to work further with these people. The waters in the lake were rising. These people had to go” (Wilson qtd. in *For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). “The Road into the Lake” demonstrates how the construction of the TVA dams, particularly Norris Dam, has forcefully severed Appalachians across generations from a personal connection to history, land, and inheritance, despite the popular idea the families gave up their homes for a higher purpose.

The speaker of “The Road into the Lake” often finds himself wondering about the community, his ancestors’ community, that has been washed away by the rising waters of Norris Lake. It is a source of fascination, even of obsession for him:

[t]his world before my world, beyond recovery,
how many times have I stared into the surface
and wondered where they worked, played marbles
and baseball, and stabled their horses? (Graves 16-19)

The speaker cannot help but imagine how similar to, and how different, these valley dwellers would be from him. Some of his interest is sparked by mere generational and cultural differences, but his concern is also tied directly to locations that no longer exist. Although he is deeply curious, he also questions this curiosity, wondering, “[w]hy keep asking these questions of the water / which can reveal nothing of those days?” (Graves 20-21). The speaker seems to understand that he will never truly know that history, because the Tennessee Valley Authority has ensured that his family’s history has drowned in the dam’s waters. Even so, he finds himself

connected to the history of this place. The speaker mentions specific people, like Doc Palmer, who delivered his mother and father into the world. In “Appalachian Values,” Loyal Jones writes that “Familism” and “Neighborliness and Hospitality” are core characteristics of Appalachians (Jones 510). Jones explains that “[b]lood is very thick in Appalachia” and that community is extremely important to the people of the mountains (Jones 511). This quality was also used against the people of the valley; “even with scorched earth and water rising, Marshall Wilson was still trying to persuade the final hold-outs to leave, and found the most effective appeal was loyalty to neighbors who now supported the project” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). In the poem, the TVA has altered the speaker’s connection to family and community through its interference with history. The speaker also notes that not so mysterious remnants of this lost civilization “surface in a drought” (Graves 7). These sightings of water-logged history inspire the speaker’s personal quest to find physical evidence of the valley that has existed before the lake. He says,

I searched the red silt for horse shoes or shards
of their coffee cups, then as now looking for the past
to appear like stacked ledges of clouds
mirroring off water, the imprint of our ancestors
stamped into the grain of my sifting hands. (Graves 40-45)

Just as the speaker cannot hold horse shoes or coffee cups, he cannot concretely grasp his own history; although it has been less than one hundred years since the construction of Norris Dam, the water and the power that it produces have already washed away both physical and immaterial remnants of the past. The speaker recognizes that his knowledge about the history of this place

“is stamped into the grain of [his] sifting hands,” suggesting that he acknowledges how futile it is that even he attempts to remember his own history (Graves 45).

While revisiting Norris Dam after its completion in 1937, the early twentieth century American journalist Ernie Pyle wrote,

Norris Dam has grown up since I saw it last. The dam is bare, and immobile, and lonely, just standing there. Norris Dam is what it should be: finished, unromantic and working.

The lake is blue, and the water is clear, and there is hardly a ripple on the shore. There is no flood worry on the upper Clinch River. (qtd. in “Norris Dam: No Flood of Worry”)

Perhaps Pyle is correct in claiming that there is no worry of new flooding because of the dam, but he forgets that this is because the TVA has already flooded entire communities to reach this point, further illustrating the speaker’s concern that his family’s history has been submerged underneath the lake. Pyle had already found the flooding of the valley to fill Norris Lake not worth mentioning only one year after the dam’s completion; as mentioned in the intro, the dams were a celebrated part of Tennessee history by the early 2000s and the darker aspects of their presence are all but erased in the eyes of the public. By the time “The Road into the Lake” was published in 2011, many of the author’s younger readers had grown up in a post Tennessee Valley Authority world; the speaker’s mourning for his own history reminds us that a town was not the only thing immersed by Norris Lake.

Not only does the speaker perceive a loss of history, he recognizes that the natural landscape of the Appalachian Mountains has been disfigured by the forceful presence of Norris Dam. In the poem, he weighs the differences between the present and the past, natural and unnatural landscapes, and towns and lake bottoms. Today, almost one hundred years after the completion of Norris Dam, the man-made lake has become part of a perceived natural landscape

in Appalachia. The speaker says, “strange things surface in a drought” (Graves 7), but who are they strange to? Certainly not to the speaker, who knows the history of the land and of what he sees as the great potential that lurks beneath the lake surface. But, to a child today, Norris Lake is simply a place to go fishing or to get thrown off of an innertube; the foundation of a house or a shard of a broken coffee cup would indeed be a strange sight to behold.

In *The Heartland Series*’ documentary, biologist Bo Baxter talks about the impact that the TVA had on the natural landscape of the valley where Norris Lake was built. He explains, “[j]ust as family’s homes were covered, so were many natural habitats,” stating that “[t]here were sacrifices made . . . the people [that used to live here] made sacrifices and the fish and mussels that lived in the river made sacrifices” (Baxter qtd. in *For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). The speaker of “The Road into the Lake” contrasts the unnatural presence of Norris Lake with the environment and lives that came before, albeit some of them were unnatural in their own way, as well. Describing the lake, he says,

[h]ere among sandstone ledges and mussel shells
a wide set of cement steps ascend to nothing,
leads to the front door of a drowned house,
the ghost of a road tracing into the shallow
middle of Norris lake (Graves 1-5)

In this stanza, the speaker introduces both the natural and the unnatural aspects of his post TVA environment. The sandstone and mussels are the current natural inhabitants of the land, but much like the original inhabitants of Appalachia, even the mussels have been partially displaced from the once natural Tennessee River System. Although the speaker sees the lake as something unnatural, he recognizes that the remains left by his ancestors are also artificial, even if their

impact on the natural world is much smaller than that of a dam. Before the construction of the dam there was the natural (mountains and rivers) and the man-made (houses and roads). Since the completion of Norris Dam, it has become more difficult to differentiate between the natural and unnatural. Today, some even consider the dam as a living structure, given power by man; “[t]he running water is a sign of Norris’s health, and also a reminder that the dam is alive in its own way. Functioning like a man-made cave that breathes and exchanges moisture, much like the caves in the bluffs that were here long before the dam” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). Norris Dam itself was constructed with materials that were mined from a quarry that sits just behind the dam today, as the builders used “resources and materials already in East Tennessee to change the landscape forever” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). While it appears as part of the natural landscape and is even made of local materials, we know that the lake is not natural, but we may struggle to comprehend how man abandoned his sustainable stewardship of the earth to turn earth into water like some god. It is somewhat difficult for us to imagine and comprehend that man could build a lake: that he could exert this amount of control over the natural world. Through this distinction, the speaker reminds us that what once was a clear line between the natural and unnatural landscape has been muddied by the rising waters of the TVA’s unnatural interference.

Even so, the speaker feels a connection to the natural landscape. He says, “There may be some fiber or platelet circulating / through me that knows why my people came here, / why they stayed” (Graves 22-23). Loyal Jones writes, “[w]e [Appalachians] are oriented around places. We never forget our native places, and we go back as often as possible” (Jones 512). Like many Appalachians before him, the speaker feels inexplicably tied to the land, feeding into Jones’s romanticized Appalachian ideal that this land always will provide for those who call it home.

The speaker is unable to truly return to his family's native place, further isolating him from the land that he feels so connected to through his family's history. But, even so, the speaker admits in hindsight that his ancestors may not have been the best stewards of the valley. He tells us of his great-grandfather's livelihood before the land was seized by the government;

I cannot picture the walls as they stood then
any more than I can see the lumberyard
on the bank of Clinch River, where my
great-grandfather strung timber into log rafts,
somewhere now under the lake's gravity. (Graves 11-15)

In *The Heartland Series*' documentary, it is stated that "Norris is what's known as a gravity dam; that means the weight of the structure, in this case two million tons of concrete, is what holds back" (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). In "The Road into the Lake," the construction of the dam is the ultimate act of destruction, as it has both physically and psychologically weighed down Appalachia. But the lumberyard is also an act of desecration which has since been normalized because of the settler desire to create a new world in Appalachia. Perhaps the animals and people that considered the mountains home long before European settlers saw the raising of the dam only as part of a continuous stream of colonial harm that began long before the words "Tennessee Valley Authority" had ever been uttered.¹

The speaker of "The Road into the Lake" feels disconnected from his family's history and the natural landscape of Appalachia, but he is still able to hold onto broken bits of history or glimpses of a drowned road. However, this physical connection is severed when the speaker

¹ There are many indigenous Appalachian writers, such as poets Qwo-Li Driskill and Paula Nelson.

speaks of the inheritance that he will never receive. He tells us that his family lived on the land beneath the lake long enough that “the last ones to leave” have never known “the first to arrive;” “that’s how long the line stretched unbroken, / seven generations by the river in Capps’ Creek” (Graves 24-27). The speaker is not the only member of his family who has felt drawn to a land that is no longer his; “some stayed as near as the government / would allow them, just across pine ridges / and creeks” (Graves 30-33). Like him, the speaker’s family members feel the inexplicable magnetism to the mountains; staying true to Jones’s so called “Love of Place,” they are unable to leave their native place behind, so they stay as near as they are able. The speaker shares that his family now has an inherent distrust of the government, as they have “form[ed] their own Tennessee Valley / authority” (Graves 33-34). The displaced family members continue to see themselves as the true authority in the valley, despite forced removal and the years between them and the initial impact of the dam’s rising waters. Unable to live on their land, the speaker’s family hovers around the edges of what was once there, spending time fishing over their drowned home. The speaker reminisces about family fishing trips, where he would join his father and uncles to fish for blue gill or even catfish. He says,

My line never went far enough, but it was
the casting that mattered, and being small there
with my father and my uncles, standing as near
as we could to land we would never inherit. (Graves 37-40)

Perhaps the speaker is remembering days from his youth, when he might have been too young to be a skilled fisher or understand the lake’s gravity, but not too young to appreciate the company of his family. Perhaps he worries that he will not be able to continue the family line; by not having children, his family’s history may sink even deeper into the waters of the lake. Even if the

speaker has children, he may feel as if he cannot adequately pass down his history since he himself only grasps at the pieces, or that he may only be postponing an inevitable loss. Even so, he recognizes that it is “the casting that matter[s]”; his attempt to keep his family’s history and legacy are important to him, even if he does not ultimately succeed.

Jesse Graves’s “The Road into the Lake” conveys a sense of yearning for the world before the Tennessee Valley Authority, but also an understanding that Appalachians cannot undo what was done to them and their land by the government via the Tennessee Valley Authority. Despite Cotte’s argument that Appalachian otherness does not exist, the speaker in Grave’s piece does fit neatly into Loyal Jones’s stereotype of the mountain man, perhaps speaking some truth towards a unique Appalachian identity, which would be particularly shaped by historical events such as that of the TVA. “The Road into the Lake” demonstrates no positive consequences from the intrusiveness of the TVA; the speaker sees only loss, bleakness, and injustice in the looming structure that was supposedly “built for the people” (“Norris”). In spite of claims that Norris Dam was built for the greater good, it does not seem that the speaker would agree; his loss outweighs the idea that the TVA had public interest in mind when they flooded people out of their homes in the Tennessee Valley. *The Heartland Series* states, “[p]eople displaced by Norris Dam endured a traumatic adjustment, thrust from olden times into the twentieth century,” but “[t]hat’s what the story of Norris has always been: compromise for the sake of something larger” (*For the Greater Good: Norris Dam at 80*). In the poem, the speaker’s reckonings with the disorientation that Norris Dam and Norris Lake have brought upon his own life and legacy act as a eulogy for the world lost to the water.

CHAPTER 3

THE DISPLACEMENT OF PLACES IN JACKSON WHEELER'S "THE TVA BUILT A DAM"

Jackson Wheeler's "The TVA Built a Dam" (1993) describes the submerging of many locations in Western North Carolina; some are Cherokee, like "Tusquitee," and others are more settler-Appalachian, like "Hangin' Dog" or "Beechertown" (Wheeler 6, 34). It is difficult to pin down a single location that was affected by TVA projects in the poem, which is ultimately one of the points of the piece. Some of the places listed in the poem fall as far south as the Chatuge Dam on a modern map, near the Georgia state line, while some appear farther north around what is now Fontana Lake. Some are cities, some neighborhoods, some mountain gaps, and some mere street names now. We can conclude that Wheeler is writing about the Fontana Dam by finding one specific place in the poem, the Almond School, which now sits hauntingly abandoned beneath Fontana Lake. On a current map, all of the places that appear in the poem lay around the southwest corner of Appalachia, but perhaps the names of these places were displaced along with their inhabitants when Fontana Dam was built. It is easy to imagine that only a particular demographic was affected by the TVA, but Wheeler's "The TVA Built a Dam" reminds us that many different people were affected by the construction of dams throughout the Tennessee River system. In writing of this myriad of people and places, Wheeler suggests that different people, cultures, places, and even the dead were all forcefully displaced because of the creation of Fontana Lake. "The TVA Built a Dam" reminds us of the pain inflicted upon different communities in Appalachia so that others could have power.

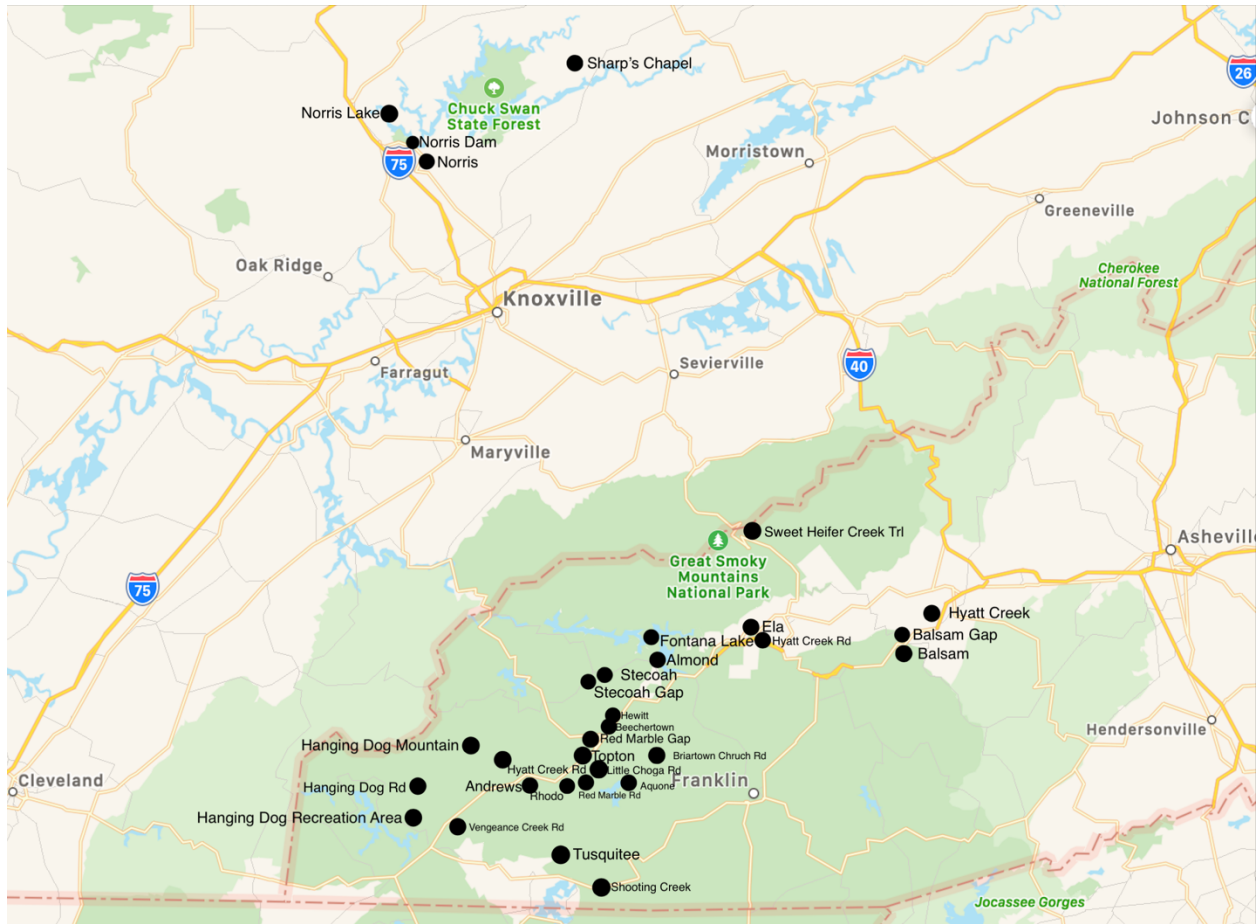


Fig 2: Locations from “The Road into the Lake” and “The TVA Built a Dam” on a Contemporary Map of Appalachia

The Fontana Dam was different than many of the TVA’s other projects; after its completion, it was the tallest dam in the Eastern U.S. after its completion (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”). The TVA website explains,

If the design was unusual, the execution would be even more so. This untraveled spot on the upper reaches of the Little Tennessee River was 65 rugged miles from Knoxville, Tenn., and a good deal farther from Asheville, N.C. The nearest real community was the North Carolina town of Robbinsville, which was 35 miles away—more than an hour’s travel at that time. (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”)

The TVA claims that the construction site of Fontana Dam was extremely remote, contradicting the speaker in “The TVA Built a Dam,” who claims that the construction of the dam displaced multiple communities (although the communities were also displaced by flooding as a result of the dam’s purpose, not just the construction of the dam). The TVA identifies Robbinsville as the “nearest *real* community,” which begs the question: what did the Authority constitute as a *real* community of people? Would a small community of mountain dwellers have been considered a viable community to the Authority, or would they have just been seen as an easy group to remove?

The TVA website informs us that the Fontana Dam workforce was working day and night in light of the second world war’s demand for power, but that the location was too remote for workers to do anything but live in camps nearby (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”); the TVA states, “[i]t was clear that TVA would have to bring a town to them” (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”). It goes on to elaborate, “[t]he agency had some experience with town-building, and drew on lessons from Norris, the TVA community that was still thriving more than five years after the completion of Norris Dam. But Fontana was far more remote, and this dam was going to be twice as tall” (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”). In spite of the “remoteness” of the Fontana project, a little town sprung up in the mountains to house laborers and their families. Catte argues that the TVA’s creation of communities for its workers is another false pretense that meant to demonstrate how the government was caring for the poor Appalachians; “[i]ndustrialists demanded obedience from their workers, much like children, and in return showed their benevolence in the form of housing, entertainment, or more comfortable working conditions” (Catte 43). However, “[u]nlike Norris, which has remained a cozy residential community for almost 70 years, Fontana was largely deserted after the dam was built. Only 50

families remained, tending to the dam and power plant” (“The Miracle in the Wilderness”).

While many people still visit Fontana Dam today, the town remains relatively small at 7,000 inhabitants.²

Despite the TVA’s claim that Fontana Dam was isolated from the rest of the world, the speaker opens “The TVA Built a Dam” by describing the forced consolidation of the locations listed throughout the poem:

It is a lake now, what was once a multitude
of different names, not towns really, but
places, lived in for a hundred years.

Submerged now, into one name. (Wheeler 1-4)

While on a modern map, the locations serialized in “The TVA Built a Dam” fall across a large region, the speaker tells us that our present-day maps would not match those of the valley from a century ago. All of these places,

Motley, Topton, Choga,

Hangin’ Dog, Tusquittee, Ela,

Balsam, Stecoah, Hyatt’s Creek,

Shootin’ Creek, Rhodo, and Red Marble (Wheeler 5-8),

have seen the consequences of the construction of the government’s man-made marvels in Appalachia. They have been changed topographically, either shifted around to make room for the new authority of the valley or completely erased by harsh concrete or water. The speaker tells us of the urgency of these rising waters:

And the dead sleep, sorted and unsorted,

² Historic Norris, while still a vibrant town, is only home to 1,500 people today.

disturbed or undisturbed by the waters that came,
more than three feet a day, climbing until the
lake was formed, over the Almond School, the Free Will
Church . . . (Wheeler 56-60)

The speaker reminds us that the government flooded houses and graves, schools and churches alike. He describes the water as rising “like a great shroud over Hewitt, Almond, / Little Chooga, and Beechertown,” noting how it covered “tired farms, / clapboard houses, gardens left fallow, oak, chestnut, / pine, sycamore, chinquapin” (Wheeler 33-36). As in Graves’s “The Road into the Lake,” the waters in Wheeler’s poem do not discriminate between the natural and man-made; they flood anything in their path, whether it be a cultivated farm or a forest of pines. These places were all flooded by the TVA; Jones reminds us that “Love of Place” is one of the defining values of Appalachian people:

We never forget our native places, and we go back as often as possible. A lot of us think of going back for good, perhaps to the Nolichucky, Big Sandy, Kanawha, or Oconoluftee, or to Drip Rock, Hanging Dog, Shooting Creek, Decoy, Stinking Creek, Sweetwater, or Sandy Mush. Our place is always close in our mind. (Jones 512)

By flooding these native places, both of the Native American population and of the European colonizers (a perceived native place, in this case), the TVA prohibited Appalachians from fulfilling what Jones sees as one of their most essential characteristics, causing them to literally displace mountain people from their homes while also permanently displacing them from their identities.

“The TVA Built a Dam” is dedicated to “*Ruth Day Wheeler*,” the author’s mother (Wheeler), and the speaker explores the loss of community inflicted by the TVA by looking

through the eyes of his mother. The speaker indicates that she is haunted by the memories that she has of the TVA;

My 85-year-old mother dreams about it: she writes
to me in her crabbed scrawl that it is warm, time
to put out a garden, like her mother, and her
mother's mother before her. (Wheeler 37-40)

Removal enforced by the TVA has left the speaker's mother without her home and heritage and has severed her from her Appalachian identity. Like that of the speaker in "The Road into the Lake," the speaker in "The TVA Built a Dam" has been removed from a family home where the lineage stretched back for generations. The speaker's mother dreams of rising waters and places that she can no longer return to, and she dreams of people who are gone; "[a]t night she will dream / of her mother's garden, the old farm, her grandfather / with the wild beard, and all her dispersed kin" (Wheeler 41-44). The speaker's mother is burdened by her inability to take back time and return to her native place, but the poem goes on to suggest that she is more haunted by the desecration of the dead spurred by the construction of TVA dams than by her own losses. On the TVA website, the authority claims, "[t]o carry out its mission in the Tennessee Valley, TVA had to alter the landscape" ("Relocated Cemeteries"). Not only did the TVA alter the physical landscape of the mountains and the psychological landscape of the people who lived there, they also removed the dead from their resting places on a massive scale. The TVA states, "[s]urveys were conducted of all cemeteries in the project areas. Beginning in 1933, more than 69,000 graves were investigated, and over 20,000 graves were relocated. TVA moved the graves from areas that were to be flooded and from isolated sites to comparable burial places nearby" ("Relocated Cemeteries"). The TVA claims that these removals were a necessary part of large

construction projects that had been planned, and thus they “undertook the difficult and delicate task of relocating thousands of graves” (“Relocated Cemeteries”). The speaker tells us that his mother remembers,

[w]ord came by wagon and mule. In one place
the TVA sent a Ford car through the creek and up
Bethel Hill to spread the news that everybody,
including the dead, would come away. (Wheeler 9-12)

The TVA claims that “[t]he removal was done in accordance with state law and the wishes of the next of kin (“Relocated Cemeteries”), but the speaker wonders “who would speak for the dead?” (Wheeler 13). The speaker tells us,

[w]hen my mother remembers, she says, ‘They was
ours. All those dead belonged to somebody.’
People from far off came back, and the remembered
dead were disinterred by the TVA. Even the dead. (Wheeler 25-28)

The speaker points out that the impact of the TVA reaches far beyond altering the topography of Appalachia; its rise to power even reached beyond the grave. Like the people and places displaced by the TVA, the dead were also forcefully moved to suit the plans of the federal government; “[s]ome were taken / to Aquone, some to Andrews, and the water rose,” but at least, “the Authority / gave them all stones with names” (Wheeler 31-32, 30-31). The TVA tells us, “In addition to relocating the graves, TVA cleaned, repaired and reset monuments and headstones at the reinter[n]ment sites” (“Relocated Cemeteries”). The speaker sees this act as another empty way to create a pretense of reparations and benevolence: a way for the TVA to keep its image up. He notes,

[t]hese dead, secure in their knowledge of being
numbered by the God who counts sparrows,
could not mark their graves with marble or granite.

What did it matter? He knew where they were. (Wheeler 21-24)

Here, the speaker takes authority away from the TVA and gives it to God. The speaker's mother, also placing authority in God, believes that ultimately, He will overpower the TVA in His own judgement;

God, she says, will sort them out, moved
as they were from places like Briartown, Vengeance
Creek, and Sweet Heifer, moved by the state
in trucks and dumped into one common grave,
or so it is believed. (Wheeler 49-53)

Once again, the actions of the Tennessee Valley Authority are presented in a much darker light by Appalachian poets than historians or TVA writers. The idea that the disinterred bodies were dumped into mass graves could not be more drastically different than the history that the TVA website tells, bringing the tension between these two different sources of history to light.

The title of Wheeler's piece alone, "The TVA Built a Dam," states a simple fact; the TVA did, indeed, build a dam in Fontana. However, the simplicity of the title and of the happy side of the story presented by the TVA hide all of the pain and the history of the places and people in the poem. The people that were uprooted by the Tennessee Valley Authority lost their homes and parts of their Appalachian identity, they lost communities and places, and they even lost their dead. And what for? The speaker's mother remembers the people in North Carolina who lit kerosene lamps against the dusk, talked about

weather, revivals, their crops and mules; marveled
among themselves about the stories of electricity
in Tennessee that could make a room as bright as day. (Wheeler 61-64)

The speaker points out that the *Tennessee* Valley Authority has primarily concerned itself with the well-being of Tennessee, even though its havoc has been wreaked across state lines. Here, he suggests that the displaced people of North Carolina reaped no benefits from the actions of the Authority. Although the Tennessee Valley does stretch across state lines, it appears that the TVA's "benevolence" does not in the eyes of the speaker. Jackson Wheeler's "The TVA Built a Dam" ultimately serves as a reminder that the Tennessee Valley Authority's imprint did not stay within the Tennessee state line, and neither did its lust for power. The Authority affected people from across southern Appalachia, moving their homes, traditions, and even their dead so that outsiders could profit from their suffering.

CHAPTER 4

TO DAMN OR NOT TO DAM: THE PRESERVATION AND DESECRATION OF PARADISE IN ROSE MCLARNEY'S "IMMINENT DOMAIN"

Rose McLarney's "Imminent Domain" explores the dynamics of power and how it is wielded through a multi-faceted account of the construction of dams in the Americas by drawing parallels between the construction of dams in Central and South America and in Appalachia. Through these stories, the poem presents the idea that different beings hold power during different moments of their existences, and that this wielding of power leads to both small and large consequences. Human desire for power ultimately leads to one of two consequences: the desecration or preservation of the paradise that is our earth and home. In "Imminent Domain," McLarney, like Wheeler, follows the experiences of families in Fontana, North Carolina, where the Tennessee Valley Authority constructed a dam in 1944. The power of destruction, which is disguised as progress, is at the forefront of this history. McLarney also follows the efforts of protestors, who are mostly indigenous peoples, in Central and South America as they fight to preserve the earth by blocking the construction of new dams in their countries. The protestors are attempting to preserve paradise, and it is ambiguous in the poem as to whether they succeed or fail. In contrasting these striking histories, "Imminent Domain" suggests that in damming the earth, we are damning it as well.

"Imminent Domain" opens by establishing the power held by both mankind and the natural world. Immediately, we know, "[d]ams create power by holding back / the forward rush of rivers" (McLarney 34-35). Here, the unnatural holds back the force of the natural to create energy, and although the river is contained by the dam, it is still powerful. However, man feels as if he has the right to contain and utilize nature's power to his own benefit. As powerful and

uncontrollable as the natural world can be, the speaker suggests that mankind believes his power to be greater. She tells us that the dam was “a sleek structure, larger, stronger / than the greatest rock faces,” and that the rock faces “were creased, had faults, could fall” (McLarney 15-17). The man-made dam is seen as something that is indestructible, whereas nature is seen as uncontrollable and unpredictable. Even still, the speaker senses that man believes himself to be in control.

The people in “Imminent Domain” are given power as well. Describing protestors in South America, the speaker commands that we “[s]ee the stage proportions / of power, how strong the will to hold back” (McLarney 8-9). Here, the protestors are compared to the very thing they are fighting against: the strength of dams. They are both able to hold back mighty forces in the same ways. As powerful as the protestors are in their attempt to preserve paradise, other people use their power to work against the natural world in acts of desecration. The speaker recognizes that these desecrators do not always have bad intentions; in fact, they have goals of creating electricity, building the economy, and generally helping the people of their regions. Most people would argue that the dams are intended to be environmentally friendly as they are a way to replace fossil fuels with renewable hydroelectric power; they are part of a mission to serve the greater good. However, despite being created with good intentions, the dams still produce negative consequences. The speaker notes,

[p]ower always is sent to serve regions other
than where it is made. Still, some dam designers,
calling themselves *engineers, enemies of error,*
meant well. (McLarney 60-63)

The speaker is wary that the dam designers are unaware that their work does not benefit their communities as they believe it will. The men who build dams do not always intend to be desecrators, but they do choose to preserve what they believe is in human interest: the need for control and power in a civilized world—electricity. The speaker understands the desire for power that she sees in the engineers. She admits,

I have done as much. Didn't I
spend hot childhood days damming
up creeks, feeling like a creator,
maybe even a savior, piling debris to slow
water into a little pool to float in a while? (McLarney 67-71)

The speaker implies that exercising power over her natural environment has made her feel like a god; she understands that those who build dams must feel the same way. As a child, the speaker does not really have the power to desecrate. She has built her small dams in small waterways with natural materials from her immediate environment; the consequences would have also been small. After all, is she not doing as the beaver naturally does? As adults, the men who build dams cannot hope for consequences as small as those that a child would be responsible for. Their dams are larger and more unnatural and thus have larger and more unnatural consequences.

“Imminent Domain” focuses on one story of desecration in a region where the Tennessee Valley Authority built forty-seven dams in the twentieth century: thirty to create power and seventeen to control flooding and to use for “recreation” like boating, fishing, and swimming (“Fontana”). Dams spread throughout the Tennessee River system, with Fontana Dam blocking the Little Tennessee River. Fontana Dam was built in the 1940s to provide electricity for war efforts, but it still has a dark history, as we have seen in Wheeler’s “The TVA Built a Dam.”

Here, the speaker tells us of her childhood innocence; when young, she has had no cause to question the dam's presence:

On summer outings I swam over houses
in Carolina. Whole towns lay below
our lakes, but I didn't think of it as home
to the largest engineering project in the world. (McLarney 10-13)

The dam and its reservoir have been simply part of the speaker's perceived natural environment. She has had no need to question its existence or to ask what or who has called the valley home before the water has claimed it. However, as an adult, the speaker now knows that there is something sinister in the dam's history. She recognizes that she should be angry with this dam's history, because "for one dam, thirteen hundred families [were] / evicted, ninety cemeteries [were] dug up" (McLarney 22-23). The Tennessee Valley Authority's website does not mention this. In fact, it celebrates progress in Fontana much as it does for Norris: "[a] new town, housing some 5,000 people who worked around the clock in three shifts, sprang up in the forest, and the project broke construction records" ("Fontana"). After all, what are 1,300 families in comparison to 5,000, plus electricity to help the boys at war? However, to the speaker, the lives lost are in no way justified by TVA's other efforts:

Shaped like a butterfly,
that's the Tennessee Valley. But it is no
flighted, light thing. My thoughts should swim
with darkness, hearths gone cold, emptied graves,
fish slipping slick-bellied over stones,
when I turn on an electric lamp. (McLarney 24-29)

Unlike in her childhood, when she has been oblivious to the desecration that lay beneath the lake, the adult speaker is horrified by the presence of the dam and the history of relocation and destruction that it holds. She also feels guilty for using the power that the dam creates, as if it is somehow a betrayal to those overlooked and lost during the construction of the dam.

Appalachians could not fight against the TVA; the government-funded project was too large and too exciting to protest. In “Imminent Domain,” we are warned about the practice of eminent domain, which is the right of a government to seize private property for public use with payment of compensation. The people of Fontana have not been able to preserve their paradise, although they are in no way to be blamed for the desecration of their home. The surviving citizens of Fontana and of other TVA cities have learned to be as the speaker once has been. They have learned to accept the dam as part of their world. They turn on their electric lamps, and they do not think of the houses and lives beneath the lake. However, the speaker knows that they do not truly forget their history:

What Fontana families have been asking for,
for more than fifty years, is to have roads
built to those cemeteries still above water,
the footpaths to which did not show on maps
and were cut off long ago. They want to go back
to their dead. (McLarney 49-54)

As a result of the construction of Fontana Dam, lives have been ruined alongside the environmental desecration that has occurred. As seen in “The TVA Built a Dam,” thousands of graves were relocated in the Fontana area. The speaker is sympathetic to the desires of Fontana families, but she also says that “[t]here is much to regret” (McLarney 75). It is possible that she

and the other people who call Fontana home have regret for different parts of this sad history. Through her admiration of the Central and South American protestors, the speaker appears to regret that Appalachians did not or were unable to protest. The speaker seems to wish that her people could have stopped the Tennessee Valley Authority from uprooting their lives and damming their river, appearing to regret that the TVA was ever created at all.

A world away from the Little Tennessee River, the speaker sings songs of protestors in Central and South America who are fighting to prevent the desecration of their paradise and home. The speaker states that they demand “[l]et me keep it” in the same way that the people in Fontana plead “[l]et me get it back” and asks, “[a]ren’t our feelings common?” (McLarney 55, 56). Both the protestors in Central and South America and those who did not protest in Appalachia stand against the dams. The TVA sees its influence as important, claiming to be a “classroom for the world” (“Classroom for the World”). In 1961, “President Kennedy remarked that he wanted ‘to share the great experience of the TVA with other nations with the gap between resources and resources development.’ He went on to direct the agency ‘to study ways in which the lessons it has learned in the Tennessee Valley may be exported abroad and applied to our great objective of human enhancement’” (“Classroom for the World”). The TVA opened its facilities to international visitors, hoping to help the “free and emerging nations of the world” to develop in the same way that Appalachia had (“Classroom for the World”). The speaker in “Imminent Domain” tells us that the TVA was indeed able to disseminate its plans to other developing countries, as there are extensive plans for the construction of new dams in Latin America:

. . . Dams planned

for Suriname, Mexico, Panama, Patagonia,

Costa Rica. Already, so many rivers

are dammed that the earth is thrown off. (McLarney 30-33)

The speaker admits her disgust for the dams in the word “dammed,” indicating that the rivers are both dammed and damned under human control. In his article about the construction of dams in Patagonia, Rory Carroll states that the interior minister of Chile told reporters, “The most important thing is that our country needs to grow, to progress, and for this we need energy” (qtd. in Carroll). It appears that the dams planned for Latin America all had/have this common goal: to supply developing nations with the power to progress. Apparently, human development is more important than the conservation of the natural world in this scenario. The speaker believes that existing dams have already done enough damage to throw the earth off of its axis; she cannot comprehend how much more destruction might occur if more dams are built to please the fleeting ideas of mankind (McLarney 34). The speaker recognizes that the people of Central and South America will do all that they can to avoid having the same fate as the people of Fontana. The indigenous protestors are fighting to prevent further environmental damage in their homes “where they speak their rare languages, / in rain forests, among orchids still unnamed” (McLarney 47-48). Unlike in Fontana, people in Central and South America flood the streets in protest;

. . . In the news,

there are photos out of South America,

old women who won't leave

the land troops have come to claim,

for construction. Their bodies

pause the flood, for a few hours. (McLarney 2-7)

These protestors exercise their right to power, and in doing so, they powerfully establish their anti-dam position. And, in some nations; the protestors have paused the flood for more than just a few hours. In Costa Rica, for example, the Supreme Court halted the construction of the Diquis Dam in 2016 after a five-year hold due to the activism of indigenous communities (McPhaul). However, despite successes like this one, many of the people who are fighting against the desecration of paradise are losing. In Panama, the indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé people challenged the construction of the Barro Blanco Dam and lost (Grossman). Barro Blanco was built, and the Ngäbe-Buglé lost their home to the waters. In his article “Dam Lies: Despite Promises, an Indigenous Community’s Land Is Flooded,” Daniel Grossman reports on the dam’s construction and its consequences. Here, he quotes a Ngäbe-Buglé man, Bulu Bagama, who has lost everything in the resulting floods; “If God did this, if he filled this with water, it’d be one thing. But it wasn’t God who did this. It was done by man, and someday, he’ll pay” (qtd. in Grossman). Bagama knows exactly what the source of this environmental destruction is: mankind. He also knows that it is man that will ultimately pay for his own acts of desecration. Men like Bagama have seen desecration spreading like wildfire across the entire world; they do not want it to spread to what little paradise that they are still able to hold on to. Unfortunately, for many, it spreads without their consent.

In “Imminent Domain,” the speaker expresses her admiration for what remains of the natural world and the spirit of those who wish to preserve it. Although “progress” has already come to Fontana, the speaker still admires “the bulbs / of surviving daffodils” (McLarney 77-78). She also admires

. . . the blazes

of color on the cheeks of tribes

come to the cities in protest, their timeless
tattoos, what looks like the past
storming the streets. (McLarney 78-82)

The desecration of paradise has already commenced across Appalachia and Latin America (and sadly, in the rest of the world, as well), and it is at different stages in different places. In Fontana, the building of the dam cannot be reversed. Despite this permanent change, the speaker finds places to admire the natural beauty of her home, which is still one the most biodiverse regions of North America. In Central and South America, where not as much developmental “progress” has been made, many are battling against future damage to the environment. The speaker admires the strength of the protestors in spite of possible negative outcomes. In the beginning of the poem, she compares their strength to that of a dam, but at the end, the protestors become a river “storming the streets,” having surged through the very thing that was holding them back (McLarney 82). Like nature, the protestors are ultimately uncontrollable and unpredictable, even if the desecrating man thinks he is the sole controller of power. The speaker believes that the protestors, who fight for the preservation of paradise, have a more just cause than men who act as desecrators. She hopes that ultimately, the power of the protestors will prevail. In “Imminent Domain,” McLarney urges us to be self-aware of the damage that we inflict upon the earth and asks that we strive not to be desecrators, but preservers of paradise.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The three poems analyzed in this piece offer grim views on the legacy of the TVA. However, Jackson Wheeler ends “The TVA Built a Dam” on a bright note; the community in the poem “. . . marveled / among themselves about the stories of electricity / in Tennessee that could make a room as bright as day” (Wheeler 61-64). Although, as McLarney points out, “[p]ower always is sent to serve regions other / than where it is made (McLarney 60-61). Despite the negative perspectives in the poems, to this day, the TVA boasts of its accomplishments: commitment to clean energy, fertile land, and the Appalachian people. On the TVA website, the Authority states, “[w]e are committed to clean air and a clean water supply for our region, as well as protecting its historical, cultural and environmental resources. We take great care of our 293,000 acres of public land and 11,000 miles of shoreline on behalf of the people of the Tennessee Valley” (“Environmental Stewardship”). The website also notes that the “TVA, arguably, began as a fertilizer project,” stating that Tennessee’s soil was worn to a “point of worthlessness” in the early twentieth century (“Bringing the Land to Life”). In “Imminent Domain,” the speaker asks, “[w]hat work but building / was there left for locals, with farmland / eroded?” stating that “[e]veryone was trying / to hold things into place” (McLarney 63-66). The numerous dams throughout the Tennessee River System also allow the TVA to limit flooding to prevent further damage to fertile soil, and the TVA has been able to fortify what was seen as useless soil at the beginning of the twentieth century with Nitrate, supposedly bringing it a healthier state for Appalachians to continue farming (“Bringing the Land to Life”). As mentioned by Catte, some of the land that was seized by the government was not flooded but used to make

state parks which are still in use and of value today. Why then, do Appalachian writers seem to steer clear of any mention of praise for the TVA?

The work of Graves, Wheeler, and McLarney demonstrate the immense physical and psychological consequences of the interference of the Tennessee Valley Authority in Appalachia, and McLarney stretches these consequences to be relevant on a global scale. As seen in the poems, the TVA was responsible for uprooting thousands of people, both living and dead. They were responsible for the flooding of towns and the drowning of valleys. There are further consequences spurred by the actions of the Authority that these three poems do not even begin to touch, as well. In *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, Elizabeth Catte tells readers that she is from a corner of Tennessee where the TVA physically impacts the current community, not just their ancestors. She writes,

[i]ts power-generating facilities produce coal-ash, a particularly toxic substance that defies convenient disposal. Using the TVA's own data, the Southern Environmental Law Center estimates that over the last sixty years, twenty-seven billion gallons of coal-ash have leaked from the utility's company Gallatin facility, one of six such plants in Tennessee. (Catte 128)

The TVA seems to have continued acting as if it a benevolent force for the greater good, despite creating pollutants like coal ash. For example, after a 2008 industrial spill at the Kingston Fossil Plant, “[t]he TVA responded by purchasing 180 contaminated properties and 960 toxic acres of land” in an attempt to resolve the issue (Catte 128). Catte writes that in the TVA's meager attempt at reparations, people were left behind living in toxic waste, having nowhere else to go. Despite these more current offenses, Appalachian poets do seem to focus their attention primarily on the more dated implications of the TVA dams, suggesting that the pain created by

the initial actions of the TVA has been long lasting in Appalachia. As mentioned in the introduction, Wheeler, Graves, and McLarney write from three different generational perspectives, bringing the lasting wounds brought onto Appalachians into the twenty-first century, almost one-hundred years after the first TVA dam was built in Norris.

Catte writes, “[o]urs is a region that makes graveyards for mountains, because companies have made our mountains into graveyards” (Catte 13). She argues that the environmental and societal desecration of Appalachia is rooted in mankind’s desire for capital and power and that our history has been written by those who have claimed power in the region, whether they be Appalachian or not. She explains,

The shared stories and analogues at work are not about people, but about power. it reflects how credibility falls easily to those given privilege of defining *who* or *what* Appalachian is. It also shows the rewards that fall to individuals, universally men and exclusively white, regardless of what company they keep. It is the power to grant yourself permission for continued exploitation of vulnerable subjects. (Catte 93)

Ultimately, the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the federal government has oppressed the very people that they claim to be helping because of the belief that certain parties and people deserve to hold more capital and power than others, thus outweighing the “good” things that the TVA has accomplished in the eyes of the authors presented here.

I believe that these poems and others from the Appalachian repertoire serve as warnings against the repetition of history, and that they can also serve as warnings against further ecological destruction. “Imminent Domain,” in particular, acts as a piece of activism, calling us to end the oppressive cycle of capitalism that has taken root in Appalachia and around the world as we fight against our current climate crisis. All three poems serve as lessons of time and an

attempt to write down the unwritten parts of Appalachian history in regard to the Tennessee Valley Authority and the federal government. Catts writes, “[t]here are, of course, individuals in the region who think the future of Appalachia is still coal black. But I prefer to think that it might be brighter” (Catts 130). “The Road into the Lake,” “The TVA Built a Dam,” and “Imminent Domain” do serve as reminders of a dark time in Appalachian history, acting as eulogies and warnings, but they also offer a glimpse of hope for an Appalachia that can serve as an example to other parts of the world. Graves, Wheeler, and McLarney all offer views of the positive Appalachian attributes that Loyal Jones offers in “Appalachian Values,” despite the interference of the TVA. While Appalachians and their mountains have been abused in others’ grabs at power, the people in the poems still hold onto what Loyal Jones would argue are their core values. Ultimately, Appalachian poets sing a history that has been washed away by the Tennessee Valley Authority’s “official” history, reminding Appalachians that ours is a history that should not be forgotten.

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APPENDIX A. RUNNING LIST OF APPALACHIAN POETS THAT HAVE WRITTEN
ABOUT DAMS AND THE TVA

Running List of Appalachian Poets that have Written About Dams & the TVA

Jesse Graves – “The Road into the Lake” (*Tennessee Landscape with Blighted Pine*), “The
Sunken Mill” (*Basin Ghosts*)

Don Johnson—*Watauga Drawdown*

Rose McLarney – “Imminent Domain” (*It’s Day Being Gone*), “Hereafter” (*Forage*)

Ron Rash – “Flood” (*Among the Believers*), “The Men Who Raised the Dead” (*Raising the
Dead: Poems*)

Melissa Range – “Dragging Canoe,” “New Heavens, New Earth” (*Scriptorium*)

Jackson Wheeler – “The TVA Built a Dam” (*Swimming Past Iceland*)

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