

**THE COMPETING NARRATIVES OF TELLICO**

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## **Abstract**

In 1979, the Tennessee Valley Authority closed the gates on the Tellico Dam and transformed the last thirty-three free flowing miles of the Little Tennessee River into the Tellico Reservoir. The dam led to the physical, spiritual, and affective displacement of various groups of people who all shared a collective attachment to the land and the river. These individuals witnessed the landscape transform from an agrarian landscape to an area that is now populated and managed by upper-class lakefront communities. This paper attempts to understand the post-Tellico Dam landscape by examining how the different groups of displaced peoples are choosing to re-emplace themselves in the new landscape. I employ Margaret Rodman's multivocality approach to understanding place to examine Tellico as a multivocal dimension that is shaped by the multiple meanings and narratives that have been ascribed to the land. I argue that the post-Tellico Dam landscape is a contested place where feelings of territorialization, land entitlement, and feelings of not belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate in this landscape.

## Introduction



Figure 1 Photo of the Tellico Dam  
Photo by Author

On November 29, 1979, the Tennessee Valley Authority closed the gates on the Tellico Dam and impounded the last 33 free-flowing miles of the Little Tennessee River (Figure 1). The agency claimed the dam would provide economic development for Loudon, Blount, and Monroe Counties in east Tennessee by promising numerous water-based and industrial employment opportunities for the community (Murchison 2007). TVA claimed these new employment opportunities would include approximately 6,000 new jobs and stimulate the development of 9,000 new jobs in service industries around the area, while also stimulating population growth and providing new homes for more than 25,000 people (Murchison 2007).



Figure 2 Aerial Photo of Waterfront Properties surrounded by Tellico Lake  
Source: <http://www.lakeside-realty.net/communities/rarity-bay/>

Despite the benefits that TVA boasted would come from the dam's construction, the Tellico Dam project came at a cost. The dam led to the displacement of 300 farmers and the loss of valuable farmland due to the condemnation of 38,000 acres stretching across Loudon, Monroe, and Blount Counties in east Tennessee (Murchison 2007). The once fertile farmland that previously surrounded the Little Tennessee River has all but diminished due to the creation of the Tellico Reservoir and the surrounding waterfront properties (Figure 2).

Since the construction of the Tellico Dam, a central theme of place-making surrounding issues of belonging, entitlement, and land claims has emerged between those displaced by the dam. The goal of this paper is to examine these issues that emerge from land dispossession. I argue that the post-Tellico Dam landscape is a contested place where feelings of territorialization, land entitlement, and feelings of not belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate in the post-Tellico Dam landscape.

### **Multivocality in Tellico**

This paper applies Margaret Rodman's multivocal approach to examine the multiplicity of the post-Tellico Dam landscape. This approach explores how place "is a politicized and cultural construct" that is created and shaped by the various meanings attached to a place (Rodman

1992:640). The application of this methodology is used to understand the various meanings and attachments that are ascribed from the shared and competing narratives of places (Rodman 1992). These polyphonic meanings and narratives of landscape are both historically and geographically constituted in which a place cannot be understood without an understanding of the imperial historical context of a place (Said 1989). This allows for places to then be narrated by “multiple agents in varying contexts, or places” in order to represent the multiplicity of “complex connections within a system of places” (Marcus 1989:25).

Applying a multivocal approach to understand the new Tellico landscape allows individuals within this landscape to have agency in narrating their experiences with both the past and present contestation of the dam and transformation of the land. Those displaced by the dam have developed individual methods of place-making practices based on the individual narratives, meanings, and attachments they ascribed to the previous landscape. Rodman argues that these multivocal dimensions of place allows for a single place to be understood and used differently by people from different socioeconomic, geographic, and historical backgrounds (Rodman 1992). Tellico can be understood differently based on the different narratives and meanings attached to the new landscape by those who were either physically, spiritually, or emotionally displaced by the dam.

Each form of displacement led individuals to mourn the loss of the land and river differently. These individuals share a collective history and attachment to the same land, but whether they were farmers, Cherokee, or fishermen has impacted how they have chosen to interact with the land today. This paper discusses the similarities and differences in how different forms of displacement impacts how the displaced interact with the post-Tellico Dam landscape and how they collectively view Tellico Village and TVA.

## **Methodology**

This research utilizes qualitative data to examine the multivocality of place by displaced peoples. Data was obtained through archival research, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews. The archival data was obtained from the state of Tennessee's online archive system, TVA's online library, and through the donation of newspaper clippings from interview participants. Ethnographic data was obtained through 6 weeks of participant observation and ethnographic interviews with individuals who were either physically, spiritually, or affectively displaced by the Tellico Dam.

Participant observation included living and participating on a farm in Tennessee, going on historical tours with interviewees, helping participants with their own archival research, and listening to and taking notes on the numerous informal stories and memories of the land that were voiced by the displaced. A considerable amount of my data was obtained through interviewees showing me specific places within Tellico Village that used to belong to their family or community. Observations from these interactions were recorded in a field notebook and converted into more detailed fieldnotes at the end of each day.

Interviews were conducted from June to July 2021 with 15 individuals who were either physically, spiritually, or affectively displaced from the Tellico Dam. All but two of these interviews were conducted in-person at various locations chosen by the participants. The other two interviews were conducted over Zoom and over the telephone due to concerns over Covid. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed and coded during the Fall of 2021. Excerpts from the data is used in this paper to support my argument and animosity is given to the participants quoted.

## **Historical Background**

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created as part of a series of programs, public work projects, and financial reforms that were enacted under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933 (Ekbladh 2002). This piece of legislation sought to provide relief, reform, and recovery to both the American people and the economic system that was reeling from the Great Depression (Lowitt 1983). President Roosevelt established the TVA to help "modernize" the Tennessee Valley Region by providing flood control, electricity, water navigation, and economic development to the area (Aksamit 2009). This region was commonly thought of as "being economically backward and stagnant" and included all of Tennessee and parts of Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia (Aksamit 2009:23; Ekbladh 2002).

From 1933-1945, the TVA promoted the use of technology as a central way to promote prosperity and modernity in the Tennessee Valley Region (Wheeler & McDonald 1983). David Lilienthal, TVA's director at the time, believed that "material prosperity was a prerequisite to modernization" so he promoted the construction of large dams in economically poor and underdeveloped areas to stimulate economic growth for the region (Aksamit 2009:6). This idea was a key component to TVA's mission until 1945 when TVA shifted its attention to solely focus on power, navigation, and flood control (Murchison 2007). TVA then entered into a new period of "uncertainty, indecision, and drift" in which the agency did not have a clear mission and was failing to aid in the modernization of Tennessee Valley Region (Wheeler & McDonald 1983).

Then in 1962, Aubrey Joseph "Red" Wagner was appointed the director of TVA (Wheeler & McDonald 1986). Wagner believed that reviving TVA's earlier mission of "prosperity through technological development" would help to stimulate the economy and revive the agency (Wheeler & McDonald 1986). The agency had not proposed a single multi-purpose project since 1951 and

Wagner believed that only a series of multipurpose projects would bring the desired results of industrialization, recreation, tourism, and jobs to the Valley (Aksamit 2009; Murchison 2007). To achieve these results, Wagner proposed the Tellico Dam project, a dam building project that would allow the TVA to seek congressional appropriations and help stimulate economic development in the region. However, this required the agency to find a location that could undergo “significant beneficial shifts in land use... to industrial, commercial, residential, and recreational development use” (Plater 2013:2).

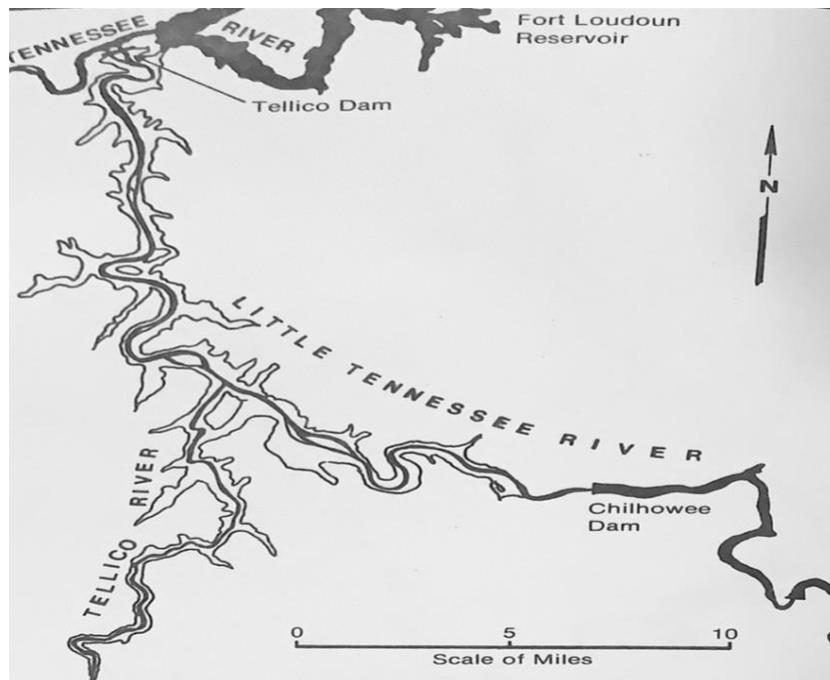


Figure 3 The Little Tennessee River with proposed impoundment (Hickman & Fitz 1978:6)

The last free flowing thirty-three miles of the Little Tennessee River was chosen as the location to construct the Tellico Dam (Wheeler & McDonald 1986). This river was a tributary of the Tennessee River that was located in Eastern Tennessee and part of Western North Carolina (Hickman & Fitz 1978). TVA chose to construct the dam “0.8 kilometers from the mouth of the Little Tennessee River” so the dam could impound water that would stretch 53 kilometers to the

Chilhowee Dam and a short canal could be developed between Ft. Loudon and the Tellico Reservoir (Hickman & Fitz 1978:2). The Tellico Reservoir was estimated to be a 6,677-hectare reservoir that would stretch across portions of Blount, Loudon, and Monroe Counties in East Tennessee (Figure 3) (Hickman & Fitz 1978).

While the Tennessee Valley Authority attempted to promote the project by claiming the dam would provide economic development to the area, the agency was met with bitter opposition from various groups who believed the dam would harm the agricultural, historical, and archaeological value of the area (Murchison 2007). These groups, made of local farmers, trout fisherman, and history enthusiasts, joined together to create the Association for the Preservation of the Little Tennessee River (APLTR), and worked alongside the Eastern Band of Cherokee to oppose the dam (Murchison 2007). Everyone within the Association shared the desire to protect the Tellico Plains and the Little Tennessee River, but they each had different reasons as to why they contested the dam development. For example, the farmers feared their removal from and loss of their farms, the environmentalists sought to protect the river and its “natural” state, the history enthusiasts involved with the Fort Loudon Association sought to protect Fort Loudoun, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee sought to protect their ancestral lands and the Cherokee way of life from destruction.

Together, the APLTR argued that the Tellico Dam project failed to make sense economically and an alternative development design that focused on promoting tourism and recreational resources would produce more economic benefits for the area than the dam would (Plater 2013). This alternative plan would allow for the landowners to keep ownership of their farms, prevent the destruction of the Cherokee archaeological sites, and allow for the preservation of the river. TVA, however, refused to accept the alternative plan and, despite the efforts made by

those in opposition to the dam to halt the project, TVA managed to supersede any efforts made to block the continuation of the Tellico Dam project (Plater 2013).

As opponents to the dam continued to fight the Tennessee Valley Authority, it became clear that they would have to find a viable theory for legally challenging the dam if they wanted to defeat TVA and halt the Tellico Dam project (Murchison 2007). The early years of the dam opposition, however, had no considerable foundation for a legal challenge until the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was passed in December of 1973 (Murchison 2007). An ichthyologist from the University of Tennessee discovered the habitat of an endangered species of fish called the snail darter (*Percina tanasi*) near the construction of the dam in August of that year (Wheeler & McDonald 1983). The passing of the Endangered Species Act allowed for lawyers to utilize the act as the basis for creating a new line of political-legal organization that allowed those in opposition to the Tellico Dam to utilize the snail darter discovery as a means to prevent the dam from being constructed. Thus, they used the discovery of the snail darter to argue in *TVA v. Hill* that the Tellico Dam would destroy the habitat and endanger the snail darter population among the river.

In the end, Congress ended up exempting the Tellico Dam from the Endangered Species Act due to the sneaky tactics of Republican Senators John Duncan and Howard Baker. Duncan and Baker slipped an amendment onto the Energy and Water Development Appropriation Bill of 1980 to allow for the exemption. President Jimmy Carter signed the appropriations bill in September 1979, which allowed TVA to move forward with the construction of the Tellico Dam (Gilmer 2011). TVA then closed the gates of the dam on November 29, 1979 and transformed the last 33 free-flowing miles of the Little Tennessee River into a 16,000-acre lake that is now

surrounded by middle- to upper-middle class retirement lakefront communities (Wheeler and McDonald 1983).

### **Impacts of the Physical Displacement of Farmers**

On November 13, 1979, the TVA used eminent domain to evict the last two remaining farming families from their property in Loudon County, Tennessee (Wheeler & McDonald 1986). Altogether, the Tellico Dam led to the physical displacement of 300 farming families and the condemnation of 38,000 acres of land stretching across Loudon, Monroe, and Blount Counties in east Tennessee (Murchison 2007). Physical displacement as experienced by these families deprives and dislocates displacees from their “existing socio-cultural milieu” (World Commission on Dams 2000:102-104). People dispossessed from their land endure emotional and mental struggles related to the loss of their homes (Ansoms & Hilhorst 2014; Vanclay 2017). This is because land has symbolic and material values that are embedded in the landowner’s way of life, and it constitutes a crucial element to their identities (Ansoms & Hilhorst 2014).

Furthermore, land loss from involuntary land forfeiture through the use of eminent domain may also lead displaced individuals to lose a piece of their identity (Ansoms & Hilhorst 2014). Individuals displaced by the Tellico Dam developed a sense of identity surrounding the Little Tennessee River and the agrarian landscape. The transformation of the Tellico landscape included the condemnation of both land and whole communities. Houses, churches, and schools were torn down or moved to other locations. Members of these communities were emotionally and symbolically attached to these places and lost a sense of their identity as farmers and as community members. This is because places like Tellico are “metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities” in multiple ways due to the processes of creating places in which people “fashion themselves” as they “fashion places” (Basso 1996:11).



Figure 4 Silos in Tellico Reservoir  
Photo by Author

This sense of place attachment has led to the emergence of a central theme of place-making surrounding the Tellico Dam controversy that has led to a continuous and ongoing struggle for the displaced to re-empower themselves in the new landscape. The displaced farmers continue to struggle with ways to cope with the transformation of the landscape because they have lost their sense of place (Vanclay 2017). This struggle to cope with the new environment is evident in interviews conducted with the displaced in which every respondent expressed their conflicted feelings over whether to participate in the new landscape or not. For some, the painful memories and the loss of their land prevents their return to the land. For others, the visible remnants of the past landscape allow them to feel a connection to what used to be. This is evident in the various responses I received from people when asked how seeing the old farm silos sticking out of Tellico Lake made them feel (Figure 4). The following statement is from an individual who explains how seeing the silos and visiting the new landscape is painful for him.

The silos, they break my heart. I know whose they were. I was there to help build them and fill them up each year. When I see them, it brings back memories of helping that family. It reminds me of the people who had dairy farms there. I don't like to see them. The pain from them keeps me away from Tellico Lake. I don't want anything to do with it.

-Interview with A.D., 2021

AD explains that seeing the silos “breaks his heart” because they are painful reminders of the past landscape. AD chooses not to participate in the new Tellico landscape because seeing the post-Tellico Dam landscape is a painful experience for him. The feelings AD has towards the transformation of the land are not uncommon for displaced people to endure. AD has ascribed symbolic value and meaning to the landscape that constitutes a part of his identity that he has lost due to the dam and land transformation. In a sense, he has lost his sense of place in which the stress an individual experiences from this loss can often lead to them choosing to avoid the unfamiliar (Scudder 1973).

For others, seeing the silos invokes happy memories of the past and allows them to feel a connection to the old land. One interviewee explained how the silos helps him feel closer to home.

I'm glad the silos are there, to be honest with you. I hate that they have to be there, but I'm so glad they're there. In 100 years, those silos are probably still going to be there. It's always going to be a remaining black eye on TVA for damming up what God created and for taking away and preventing God's creation from running freely. To me, I like seeing them because they are a lasting reminder of what this land used to be and of what TVA did. It's a permanent reminder that this place has a history, and this land was once something more than a TVA lake for rich people to move and retire to. Those silos sticking out of the water are a lasting reminder for us and for TVA. It will forever remind TVA that they did something wrong, and it will forever remind me of the home and land I lost. That's why I like going to the lake sometimes, to just sit and remember what used to be. It makes me feel close to my home that I can no longer see or visit.

-Interview with J.R., 2021

JR explains that the silos help him feel a connection to the old landscape. He believes they are reminders of the history of the land that has all but been washed away from the transformation of the land. The silos help JR to cope with his loss and allows him to seek familiarity to keep a connection to the land. This search for familiarity is part of a process of cultural involution that

some displaced peoples experience. In this instance, displacees attempt to “cling to the familiar” to cope with the stress of change (Scudder 1973:53).

While they each share the collective loss of their community, each individual physically displaced by the dam was attached to the land for different reasons. This is because every person has their own perceptions of place in which each person has their own emotional bond to the land and community based on individual family histories. Tellico, as a place, is experienced differently by farming families based on family history, gender, and age which has shaped and continues to shape how they interact with the new landscape. This is because people are anchored to places based on the social formations of a geographical location in which individual and local history, gender, and age all shape how they ascribe meanings to the land (Basso 1996).



Figure 5 Collection of the Last Tobacco Crop on Fork Creek  
Photo by Ritchey Family

### *Gender Dynamics of Physical Displacement*

Displacement has a gender-differentiated impact on the processes of re-employment (Meertens 2003). The social and political responses by women and men physically displaced by the Tellico Dam not only shaped the roles each played during the contestation of the dam, but also how each interacts with the landscape today. The processes of displacement and relocation from the dam was and continues to be a personal event that has impacted each displaced person differently. For instance, the unique attachments people have to the land based on their role as farmers or members of farming families shaped how interviewees responded to questions related to how they coped with their land loss. The men interviewed for this research often identified as farmers in which they would state “we were/are farmers” (Figure 5); whereas the women stated that “our dads’ were farmers” or “we come from farming families” (Gilmer 2011). The men from displaced farming families were more likely to continue subsistence farming after their

displacement than women were. Instead, women were encouraged to attend school and become local teachers, wives, or mothers.

Gender differences were also visible in how people responded to questions relating to the ways they use the reservoir or land today versus how they previously utilized the lake. The men were more likely to give a detailed description and comparison of the rich agrarian landscape compared to the landscape today. One man, whose family lost over 100 acres of farmland discussed how he loved farming, but he had to quit farming due to the “pitiful” soil on his new land.

I had a huge piece of land, about 600 acres, that was close to the river and it had the richest soil you’d ever seen. You could go out there and the soil was nothing but sand that could’ve been about ten feet deep. I would grow all sorts of crops like soybeans, wheat, and tobacco and it would provide a livable wage for my family. Every time the river would rise and go down, it would bring with it a whole lot of sand and nutrients. You could dig into that sand and just keep digging and digging and never reach the bottom. It was so beautiful, but now, my land is nothing but rocks. It’s pitiful compared to the land I and all the other farmers used to have. Our land was beautiful, and we could grow whatever we wanted because it was some of the richest farmland in Tennessee. My new land, though, is nothing but rocks. There’s no way to plant crops on it, so I, like many other farmers, had to switch from planting to raising cattle. However, that didn’t bring in enough money, so I had to quit farming. I quit a long time ago, but I think of that rich beautiful soil every day and I miss it.

-Interview with AD, 2021

This quote reflects the importance the soil and land held for many of the male farmers whose livelihood depended on farming. Interviews with these individuals were heavily focused on the different soil types of their old and new land. They all described the hardships they experienced from on their new farms because the soil was not as rich.



Figure 6 Ritchey Property before the Tellico Dam (Note the Rock)  
Photo by Ritchey Family



Figure 7 Tellico Village Neighborhood located on the Previous Ritchey Property  
Photo by Author

The women respondents did not discuss the loss of the farmland as richly as the men. Instead, they would give detailed descriptions of how losing their houses, land, and community buildings were the most difficult experiences for them. Women were also more likely to have held on to memorabilia such as old newspaper clippings, pictures, and court documents. Every female interviewee brought some form of keepsake from their home and the protest movement to their

interview. One female respondent explained how she uses and copes with the post-Tellico Dam landscape by showing me what the new landscape looks like today compared to pictures from the past. See figures 6 and 7 for a before and after picture of her family land.

I go back to my family land, and it hurts. I am taken to a land of memories where I can see and imagine my home. I can see, in my mind, the old fence line, my old tire swing hanging on the tree, and the rows of tobacco growing in the back. However, in reality, I see a lake and a bunch of mansions. It's hard because I can point to the places where my school was or where my neighbors lived, but I can't see them. All I see is water or houses. Even the land has changed from flat to hilly. It used to not look this way. This new land is my home, but it's not at the same time. I come here sometimes to try and feel close to home and I can for a bit, but then reality sets in and I am reminded of the present. This new land prevents me from ever going back to my family's house or the church that I was baptized in. Instead, there's a lake and new community standing in the places that used to make up my community. I can come back to the place that feels like home, but I am not at home. I feel both at home and homeless at the same time.

-Interview with C.R., 2021

This response shows the conflicting emotions in which the interviewee experiences as she tries to interact and feel a connection to her old landscape through interactions with the new landscape. Places often embody thoughts and memories that can lead to conflicting feelings of both familiarity and strangeness, which emerge as a result of land transformations (Field & Basso 1996). These feelings are evident in all the interviews between those who were physically displaced by the dam.

### **Spiritual & Affective Displacement**

In addition to the physical displacement experienced by the local farming population, the Tellico Dam also led to the emotional and spiritual displacement of the avid fishermen of the Little Tennessee River and of the Cherokee peoples. While neither physically lived on the land, they were both deeply impacted by the loss of the land and river. Both groups were connected to the previous landscape in multiple ways based on the individual histories and meanings they ascribed

to the land. Thus, this has led both groups to have different feelings and interactions that shapes how each group chooses to participate in the post-Tellico Dam landscape.

### *Cherokee Spiritual Displacement*

While the Cherokee were forcefully displaced from their homeland in east Tennessee during the processes of Native American Removal, they continued to be spiritually connected to their ancestral lands in Tennessee (Gilmer 2011). The Tellico Dam led to the destruction and desecration of multiple sites that were sacred to Cherokee culture. To traditional Cherokees, the loss of their homeland meant the death of the Cherokee peoples and their spirituality. A member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) explained the meaning of this loss to him and the Cherokee.

This place was once home to a great number of spots along the Little Tennessee River that were doorways to spirit worlds. There were several sites and there were several places where there were markings on the rocks that go back to the very beginning of our Creation. These doorways and the free-flowing water of the river allowed us to collect medicine and now that those doorways are lost and the river is dead, we cannot do that. We have lost our ability to practice spiritual rituals in a place that our ancestors did for centuries. In a way, we have lost a piece of ourselves as Cherokee peoples.

-Interview with C.R., 2021

This statement reflects the importance the river and land held for the Cherokee. The significance of free-flowing sources of water plays a crucial role in Cherokee religious and spiritual rituals. Historically, a Cherokee healer would lead people to the water to participate in a ceremony of communion that would allow for people to spiritually cleanse themselves (Mooney 1995). Water was and continues to be sacred to the Cherokee peoples in which flowing bodies of water are living entities with personalities that are unique to each body of water (Mooney 1995).

During the court case *Sequoyah v. TVA* in 1979, two descendants of Sequoyah, the creator of the Cherokee syllabary, explained the significance of what would happen to the Cherokee if TVA were to continue with the Tellico Dam.

If the water covers Chota and the other sacred places of the Cherokee along the River, I will lose my knowledge of medicine. If the lands are flooded, the medicine that comes from Chota will be ended because the strength and spiritual power of the Cherokee will be destroyed. If this land is flooded and these sacred places are destroyed, the knowledge and beliefs of my people will be destroyed.

-Ammoneta Sequoyah, from *Sequoyah v. TVA*

If these lands are flooded, it will destroy the spiritual strength of the Cherokee. If the homeland of our forefathers is covered with this water it will cover the medicine and the spiritual strength of our people because this is the place from which the Cherokee people came. When this place is destroyed, the Cherokee people cease to exist as a people, then all of the peoples of the earth will cease to exist.

-Lloyd Sequoyah, from *Sequoyah v. TVA*

These statements explain the significance the Little Tennessee River and the land played in Cherokee tradition. Traditional Cherokees, those who continue to practice the older traditions and Cherokee way of life, believe that the Tellico Dam killed the Little Tennessee River. The death of the river disconnects their access the spiritual worlds that the river once connected them to (Duncan 1993). They lost the ability to speak to the water, to collect medicines, and to partake in certain games that were historically played by free-flowing sources of water. This loss has led the Cherokee peoples to become spiritually displaced from the spirit of the river and land that plays a vital role in Cherokee tradition.

#### *Affective Displacement from the River*

The Little Tennessee River also played a vital role in the lives of a group of individuals called the “river rats” who experienced a deep emotional and spiritual loss when the river was dammed. This group consisted of people who spent their childhood on the river swimming, fishing, and boating on the waters. Their social life was shaped by the river as they utilized it to for recreational, economic, emotional, and social opportunities. Fishing along the river not only provided a way to bond socially but it provided people the ability to connect with nature and earn

extra income at the same time. The damming of the river impacted their ability to earn extra income from their catches, but many of the “river rats” continue to fish the lake for recreational purposes.

Methods of fishing changed after the river was dammed due to the river pollutants and the loss of river dependent fish like trout. The Little “T” was once considered to be one of the best places east of the Mississippi River to go trout fishing. However, from 1994-2017, the overall ecological health of Tellico Lake from TVA’s bi-yearly ecological health evaluations has rated “poor” or at the low end of the “fair” range (Biologist 2017). The most recent evaluation in 2019 found elevated levels of PCBs, pesticides, and arsenic in sediments collected from the lake, which can be absorbed through the skin of bottom dwelling fish like catfish (Biologist 2017). This has led the fishermen who once called themselves “river rats” to change their fishing techniques to accommodate for the new species of fish that inhabitant the lake and to change their methods of subsistence fishing to catch and release fishing.

While the “river rats” participate in recreational fishing on Tellico Lake, they often find themselves mourning the loss of the Little “T” and the beautiful trout they used to fish. The river was more than a body of water, but it provided them with the ability to form a close bond with one another, and to some, the river was described as being similar to a family member. One person described her father’s connection to the river in which she stated:

My Daddy grew up on the river. Daddy was a very abused child and the river was a place and he knew there wouldn't be anything there that would hurt him. To him, the river was not just a river. The river had a spirit that nurtured him and his soul. The spirit of the river grew my dad. My dad’s relationship to the river was one of love. He loved the water, the rocks, and the fish that swam in it. He always wanted other people to experience it the way he did. He believed the river would speak to him. The spirit of the river was speaking, and he always wanted me to feel that same connection to the river in my heart that he felt in his. So, yeah, there was a spiritual connection there for sure, and when the river was killed, my Daddy lost a piece of his soul. He was never the same after that.

-Interview with C.J., 2021

This human relationship with the Little “T” was an intimate relationship that the interviewee later goes on to describe as being similar to the relationship between God and His children. For some, the loss of the river was like losing their religion, their connection to nature, and like losing one of the places in which they felt most at home.

### **Displacement & Territoriality**

Feelings of territoriality have emerged as a product of displacement from the Tellico Dam. Individuals displaced by the dam, either spiritually or physically, collectively expressed their opinion of land and water rights in relation to the Tellico landscape. Terms such as “stole” and “took” were used in every interview to explain the process in which the TVA undertook to condemn land for the dam. These feelings have led displaced individuals to partake in secretive or clandestine practices of territorialization that involve stealing flowers from old properties, sneaking into the woods on private land, and trespassing into old farmhouses. This allows for displacees to attempt to lay claim to and feel an emotional and physical connection to land that they believe is rightfully theirs.

These feelings of territoriality shape how the displaced interact with people from the lakefront communities. When asked how they felt about Tellico Village and the residents, all fifteen interviewees responded in a similar fashion stating that they had no ill feelings towards the people from Tellico Village or any of the other lakefront communities. However, they all discussed how “snooty” and “rich” the “yankees” from Tellico Village can be. One interviewee discusses this matter in relation to Tellico Village and his feelings towards its residents.

I’m not going to say anything bad about Tellico Village residents. It’s not really their fault. TVA created this problem. They created these huge homes, and they invited the development companies to come in and create these fancy places and spaces for people to move here. I don’t have a problem with these people though. There’s some really great

people in Tellico Village. I think the problem that I have with them, though, is that these people treat us as if this is not our place. I don't have a problem with them being here, but they need to learn the history of where their property sits. They need to realize that they aren't or weren't our saviors by coming down here. We weren't the barefooted hillbillies TVA said we were. People from Tellico Village need to understand that and need to stop treating us that way.

-Interview with S.J., 2021

S.J.'s feelings towards the residents are similar to other responses I received from interviewees in which they all felt as though the members of the lakefront communities failed to learn and appreciate the history of the area. This sentiment is expressed by various displacees as an attempt to impose power over the land that was once theirs even though they no longer have any legal rights to it.

Feelings of loss, unbelonging, and anger further creates issues between the displaced and their ability to interact with the Tellico landscape. The displaced continuously struggle with conflicted feelings of whether they should participate in the new landscape. Some of the displaced have not traveled to this area since the closure of the dam's gates in 1979, and others choose to interact with the new landscape based on individual preferences. This ranges from merely utilizing the roads built by the community as shortcuts to nearby towns to actively participating in the Tellico Village community and economy through shopping, dining, and entertainment activities. However, despite an individual's willingness to participate within the post-Tellico dam landscape, the displaced struggle with conflicting feelings that prevent them from fully immersing themselves into the new landscape. One person explains how she utilizes services from Tellico Village but driving through the community is emotionally stressful.

I go to Tellico Village to get my haircut and to eat sometimes. I will even drive to my family land and try to remember it as it was before the dam. However, this makes it difficult to move on. Simply driving through Tellico Village makes it hard. Moving on is difficult because there is something similar to a scab on my heart that seems to be healing, but every time I drive past the lake or see a sign for Tellico Village, that scab is ripped off. I begin to bleed again after that, and I have to start the healing process all over again and again.

-Interview with C.R., 2021

The conflicting feelings experienced by C.R. is shared between other displaced peoples who try to interact with the new landscape. C.R. discusses her internal battle to participate in this landscape and enjoy the amenities of the community in this quote which is the result of her attempt to re-embed herself into a new space that is embedded with a history surrounded by loss and sadness for her and her family.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the post-Tellico Dam landscape has become a contested place in the making in which feelings of territoriality have emerged between the different actors associated with the land. The transformation of the Little Tennessee River into the Tellico Reservoir has led displaced people to endure emotional stress over the loss of land that was symbolically and materially valuable to them. Those displaced by the dam all shared a collective attachment to the land and river, but each individual has developed individual methods of place-making based on the individual narratives, meanings, and attachments they ascribed to the previous landscape. Displacement impacted people differently based on their connection to the land as a farmer, Cherokee, or fisherman. The multivocal dimensions of Tellico has led the post-dam landscape to become a contested arena in which feelings of territorialization and belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate with the land and water today.

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