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The Competing Narratives of Tellico: The TVA, Multivocality, and Contested Place-making in the Little Tennessee River Valley

Cheyenne Bennett

In 1979, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) 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 space to an area that is now populated and managed by middle-class and upper-middle-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-empower themselves in the new landscape. I employ Margaret Rodman's multivocality approach to examine Tellico as a multivocal landscape that is shaped by the multiple meanings and narratives that have been ascribed to the land. I argue that the multivocality of the Tellico landscape involves a contested arena where feelings of territorialization, land entitlement, and a lack of belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate, or not participate, in this new landscape. Based on ethnographic research, this study contributes to debates about large development projects and the making of dispossessed populations, how various types of displacement are experienced by individuals and

communities, and the importance of multivocality and territoriality to how new places are understood. This is the first anthropological study that examines the political ecology of the Tellico Dam and one of the few studies examining the socioenvironmental impacts of TVA projects in the U.S. South.

Keywords: Tellico Dam; multivocality; territoriality; displacement; TVA

Introduction

On November 29, 1979, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) closed the gates on the Tellico Dam and impounded the last 33 free-flowing miles of the Little Tennessee River. 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 (Murchison 2007). TVA claimed these employment opportunities would include approximately 6,000 new industrial jobs and stimulate the development of 9,000 new jobs in service industries around the area, while also promoting population growth and providing new homes for more than 25,000 people (Murchison 2007).

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 farming families 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 was greatly

diminished due to the creation of the Tellico Reservoir and the surrounding waterfront properties.



Figure 1. Tellico Dam (Photo by author)

Since the completion of the Tellico Dam (see Figure 1), the new landscape has become dominated by a contested class politics of spatial use tied to the loss of farmland and waterfront gentrification. As a result of gentrification, middle- to upper-middle-class houses have taken over the landscape, which has displaced the rural working class. This displacement has resulted in the emergence of feelings of territoriality towards a place of memory that is based on individual histories of the landscape. These various histories, or narratives, associated with the landscape have made the new Tellico landscape into a contested place-in-the-making. There are different meanings and attachments ascribed to the land by those who were physically, spiritually, or affectively displaced by the

dam. Each group has emotional attachments to a singular geographical location. This paper explores these dimensions and the different narratives, meanings, and emotions that the users of this landscape have ascribed to it. It applies Margaret Rodman's multivocal approach to understanding the multivocality of places. I argue that the multivocality of the Tellico landscape involves a contested arena where feelings of territorialization, land entitlement, and a lack of belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate or not to participate in this new landscape.

Multivocality in Tellico

This paper applies Margaret Rodman's multivocal approach to examine the multiplicity of the post-Tellico Dam landscape. It explores how place "is a politicized and cultural construct" that is shaped by multiple meanings (Rodman 1992, 640). The application of this approach is used to understand the various meanings and attachments that are ascribed from the shared and competing narratives of places (Rodman 1992). 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 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 allow 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 fishers has impacted how they have chosen to interact with the land today. This paper discusses the similarities and differences in how the displaced interact with the post-Tellico Dam landscape and collectively view Tellico Village and TVA.

Methodology

This research utilizes ethnographic data to examine the multivocality of place by those who were displaced. Data was obtained through archival research, participant observation, and 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 participant observation and interviews (n = 15) in June–July 2021.

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 once belonged to their family or community. This included a driving tour through Tellico Village and physically visiting some of the interviewees' old homesites. Participants pointed to landmarks such as specific roads, hills, old fences through tree lines, and islands on the lake during the driving tour and shared memories and old photographs of those locations. We frequently stopped at some of these locations to walk around and take pictures while discussing the history of the land and community that once belonged there. 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 with individuals who were either physically, spiritually, or affectively displaced by 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. Pseudonyms were given to these individuals to ensure their anonymity.

Historical Background

The 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 foster prosperity and modernity in the Tennessee Valley Region (Wheeler and McDonald 1983). David Lilienthal, TVA's director at the time, believed that "material prosperity was a prerequisite to modernization," so he encouraged 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 the Tennessee Valley Region (Wheeler and McDonald 1983, 200).

Aubrey Joseph "Red" Wagner was appointed the director of TVA in 1962 (Wheeler and 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 and McDonald 1986, 156). 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).

The last free flowing thirty-three miles of the Little Tennessee River was chosen as the location to construct the Tellico Dam (Wheeler and McDonald 1986). This river was a tributary of the Tennessee River that was located in eastern Tennessee and part of western North Carolina (Hickman and 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 Fort Loudon and the Tellico Reservoir (Hickman and 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 (Hickman and Fitz 1978).

While the TVA 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 that 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. 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. The Eastern Band of Cherokee sought to protect their ancestral lands and the Cherokee way of life tied to this specific area.

Together, the APLTR argued that the Tellico Dam project failed to make sense economically and an alternative development plan 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. The TVA, however, refused to accept the alternative plan and, despite the efforts made by those in opposition to the dam, 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 TVA, it became clear that they would have to find a viable theory for legally challenging the dam if they wanted to halt the Tellico Dam project (Murchison 2007). Those in opposition to the dam had no considerable foundation for a legal challenge until the Endangered

Species Act (ESA) was passed in December 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 dam construction site in August 1973 (Wheeler & McDonald 1983). The passing of the ESA a few months after this discovery allowed for lawyers to utilize the act as the basis for creating a new line of political-legal organization. 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 along the river (Plater 2013; Sims 2001; Wheeler and McDonald 1986).

In order to use the ESA to halt the construction of the dam, the snail darter had to first be listed on the endangered species list. The director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) submitted a proposal to list the snail darter as endangered on June 17, 1975, on the sole basis that the completion of the Tellico Dam would “result in total destruction of the snail darter’s habitat” (Murchison 2007, 86). TVA objected to the USFWS’s proposal, but the Secretary of the Interior ruled on October 9, 1975, that the snail darter would be listed as endangered (Plater 2013). The listing was based on agreement with the USFWS’s statement on the destructive impact that the dam would have on the snail darter’s habitat (Murchison 2007). TVA, however, refused to alter their plans with the Tellico Dam despite the decision to designate the snail darter’s habitat as being critically endangered (Plater 2013). Instead, they attempted to “implement plans to relocate the snail darter in the Hiwasee River,” which would allow them to continue with the construction of the dam (Murchison 2007, 89).

Because the USFWS did nothing to enforce the ESA that TVA was violating, dam opponents utilized Section II of the Act which allowed any individual citizen the ability to file a civil action “to enjoin any person, including the United States..., who is alleged to be in violation of any provision of this Act” (Murchison 2007, 89). Zygmunt Plater and Hank Hill immediately filed a lawsuit in the district court in 1975 to enforce TVA’s cooperation with the Endangered Species Act. District Judge Robert Taylor refused to initiate an injunction despite the snail darter’s qualifications for protection under the ESA (Plater 2010). Plater, Hill, and the APLTR then took the case to the U.S. Appeals Court in Cincinnati. The Sixth Circuit granted them an injunction in 1977 and the Supreme Court upheld that injunction in 1978 in *TVA v. Hill* (Plater 2010).

After the Supreme Court’s ruling, Tennessee’s congressional delegation became determined to have the Tellico Dam project completed. Tennessee Senator Howard Baker made an amendment to the ESA that led to the creation of a committee that would have the powers to decide whether federally funded projects “could be exempted from the ESA if the benefits of completing the project outweighed the potential risk to endangered species” (Gilmer 2011, 185). The goal of the Endangered Species Committee, commonly known as the “God Committee,” was to examine projects like the Tellico Project by investigating the economic costs and benefits of the project (Jackson 2011). This committee, after examining the money invested into the Tellico Dam project and conducting a cost-benefit analysis, unanimously ruled against the TVA and the completion of the Tellico Dam (Jackson 2011).

In the end, Congress exempted the Tellico Dam from the ESA due to the sneaky tactics of Republican Representative John Duncan and Senator Howard Baker. Duncan and Baker slipped an amendment onto the Energy and Water Development Appropriation Bill of 1980, which would allow for the exemption (Plater 2013). Gilmer (2011, 188) states that the amendment was:

...introduced at a time when there were approximately 15 members on the floor of the House. It was not printed in the Congressional [R]ecord. It was not read on the floor, nor described, in violation of the House rules. It was not debated. The amendment was passed by a voice vote. The whole process took 42 seconds.

The Senate initially rejected the amendment, but pressure from the House resulted in the Senate reversing their decision. President Jimmy Carter signed the appropriations bill in September 1979, which allowed the TVA to move forward with the construction of the Tellico Dam (Gilmer 2011).

As a last-minute effort to halt the Tellico Dam Project, Ammoneta Sequoyah, the EBCI, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians filed a lawsuit against the TVA. In *Sequoyah v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, the plaintiffs utilized the newly enacted American Indian Religious Freedom Act to argue that the TVA and the Tellico Dam were violating the Cherokee peoples' right to practice their religion or participate in religious pilgrimages along the river as their ancestors had (Jackson 2011). The two Cherokee Nations argued that the Tellico Dam would result in the loss of land that was sacred and vital to Cherokee religious practices (Jackson 2011). They believed that the dam would result in the complete inundation of "sacred sites, medicine gathering sites, holy

places, and cemeteries,” which would result in an “irreversible loss of the culture and history” of the Cherokee peoples (*Sequoyah et. al. v. Tennessee Valley Authority* 1979, 2).

However, the federal judge presiding over the case ruled against the Cherokee, stating that the “free exercise clause is not a license in itself to enter property, government-owned or otherwise, to which religious practitioners have no other legal right of access” (*Sequoyah et. al. v. Tennessee Valley Authority* 1979, 4). The judge concluded that the land in question did not legally belong to the Cherokee, but to the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the “impoundment of the Tellico Reservoir” had “no coercive effect on the plaintiffs’ religious beliefs or practices” (*Sequoyah et. al. v. Tennessee Valley Authority* 1979, 19). The plaintiffs lost their case against the TVA on November 28, 1979, and the TVA closed the gates on the Tellico Dam on November 29, 1979, transforming the last 33 free-flowing miles of the Little Tennessee River into a 16,000-acre lake (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 and 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 who are forced to move away from their homes and resettle in other locations often endure emotional and mental struggles related to the loss of their homes (Ansoms and Hilhorst 2014; Vanclay 2017).

Land has a symbolic value that is embedded in the landowner's way of life, and it constitutes a crucial element to their identities (Ansoms and Hilhorst 2014). Land loss from involuntary land forfeiture through the use of eminent domain may lead displaced individuals to lose a piece of their "soul" and identity (Ansoms and 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 locations and lost a sense of their identity as farmers and as community members. This lost sense of identity stems from places like Tellico that 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 2. 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. There is an ongoing and continuous struggle for the displaced to re-embed themselves in the new landscape. The displaced farmers have continued 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 (see Figure 2). 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 F.D., 2021

FD explains that seeing the silos “breaks his heart” because they are painful reminders of the past landscape. FD chooses not to participate in the new Tellico landscape because seeing the post-Tellico Dam landscape is a painful experience for him. The feelings FD has towards the transformation of the land are not uncommon for displaced people to endure. FD 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, displacedes 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. Every person has their own perceptions of place and 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. 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).

Gender Dynamics of Physical Displacement

Gender plays a role in how people respond to displacement (Meertens 2006). The social and political responses of displacement 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 shapes how each interact 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 were more likely to have continued farming practices after relocation to new land and they identified as being farmers in which they would state “we were/are farmers”; whereas the women often stated that “our dads’ were farmers” or “we come from farming families” (Gilmer 2011). They did not take on farming roles after their displacement but were instead encouraged to attend school and become local teachers, wives, or mothers.

Gender differences were also visible in how people responded to questions relating to how they use the lake or land today versus how they previously used the river or land. 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 B.C., 2021

This quote reflects the importance the soil and land held for many of the men 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 on their new farms because the soil is not as rich as the land by the river was.



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Figure 3. Ritchey Property before the Tellico Dam (Photo by Ritchey Family)



Figure 4. 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 3 and 4 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.D., 2021

This response shows the conflicting emotions that the interviewee experiences as she tries to interact and feel a connection to her old landscape through interactions with the new landscape. Places can 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 and Basso 1996). These feelings are evident in all the interviews between those who were physically displaced by the dam.

Spiritual and 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 fishers of the Little Tennessee River and of the Cherokee peoples. While neither physically lived on the land in the 1970s, 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. This has led both groups to have different feelings towards and interactions with the land that shape how each group chooses to participate in the post-Tellico Dam landscape.

Cherokee Spiritual Displacement

The American Indian Act of 1830, a law enacted by the U.S. to forcefully remove Indigenous peoples in America from the eastern United States, may have attempted to ethnically cleanse the American South of Native Indigenous peoples, but it did not erase

the spiritual and cultural connections they had and continue to have with their ancestral homeland (Haveman 2016). Religious and ceremonial traditions persisted no matter where they were forced to settle (Haveman 2016; Roe 2003). This perseverance has enabled Tribal Nations to maintain their cultural, spiritual, and Tribal sovereignty from the start of European colonization to the present. In fact, ethnic identity, social memories, and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK) have all encouraged and facilitated “both personal and community stability and empowerment” for Tribal Nations (Roe 2003, 56).

Despite their physical removal from the Tellico Plains, some Cherokee peoples continued to participate in spiritual and medicinal pilgrimages to partake in certain religious and ceremonial traditions with the Little Tennessee River and to maintain their spiritual and cultural connection to their ancestral homelands in Tennessee (Gilmer 2011; Mooney 1995; Plater 2013). However, the construction of the Tellico Dam imposed significant harm on the Cherokee peoples and some of their cultural practices. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), the United Keetoowah Band, and a few individuals from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma protested the TVA and the Tellico Project due to the loss of Cherokee cultural sites that would result from the creation of the dam and inundation of the surrounding land. They argued that the Tellico Dam would lead to the destruction and desecration of multiples sites that were sacred to Cherokee culture (*Sequoyah et. al. v. Tennessee Valley Authority 1979*). To some, the loss of some of these sites and the death of the river would lead to the death of the Cherokee peoples and their

spirituality as whole. A member of the 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 (Jackson 2011). 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 (Fogelson 2004; 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 (Kilpatrick 1991; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1970; Lefler 2015; 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. Some Cherokee people believe that the Tellico Dam killed the Little Tennessee River, which altered their ability to continue practicing certain culturally significant traditions that were once associated with the river (Gilmer 2013). The death of the river disconnects their access to the spiritual worlds that the river once provided (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 Little Tennessee River and land that once played a vital role in Cherokee tradition.

Affective Displacement from the River

The Little Tennessee River was also significant for 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. Their social life was shaped by the river as they utilized it for recreational, economic, emotional, and social opportunities. Fishing along the river not only provided a way to bond socially and to connect with nature, but it also allowed for fishers to earn extra income at the same time. Today, many of the “river rats” no longer use fishing as a source for secondary income, but they utilize the lake for recreational fishing.

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 (Plater 2013). 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 “river rats” to change their fishing techniques to accommodate for the new species of fish in 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. 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 emotional loss of the river was akin to losing their religion, their connection to nature, and a piece of their identity.

CJ's father felt like he lost a piece of his soul after the river was transformed into a lake. Feelings such as these challenge the idea that rivers are bounded entities that have universal meanings and usage. Instead, rivers can be anchors for religion, identity, and belonging for some (Kahn 1996; Harvey 2006).

Displacement and Territoriality

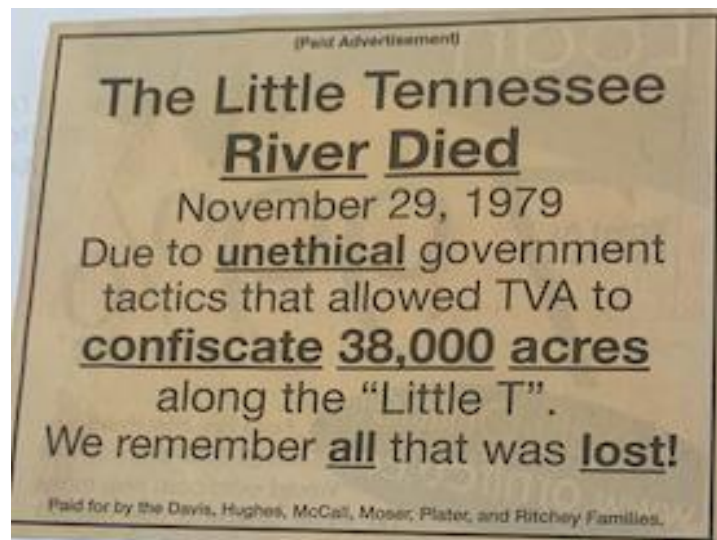


Figure 5. Newspaper clipping condemning the TVA and the Tellico Dam (Photo by author)

Feelings of territoriality and land entitlement have emerged as a product of displacement from the Tellico Dam. Territoriality refers to “any form of behavior displayed by individuals and groups seeking to establish, maintain, or defend specific bounded portions of space” (Gold 1982, 49; Greenbie 1975). It involves claiming and asserting spatial control in ways that challenge and sometimes

replace existing social contracts surrounding the ownership of spaces (Rasmussen and Lund 2018). For those displaced by Tellico, secretive and clandestine acts of territorialization allow the dispossessed to assert symbolic control over the land and attempt to regain access to the land resources that once belonged to them (Cáceres 2014, 119; Montenegro-Gómez 2008). This involves stealing flowers from old properties, sneaking into the woods on private land, and trespassing into old farmhouses. One person displaced by the dam explained how she continues to visit her family land and pick flowers that she believes are rightfully hers.

We put an article in the newspaper a couple years ago as a reminder that we haven't forgotten what has happened here. To me, that felt like a small victory. It's like telling TVA to stick it and letting them know that they haven't won. We still care and we still remember. I still go back to my land and tell everyone about it. The roads are still named after our families so I still drive them and I still go back and pick the flowers my grandmother planted on my land. I know some people might see that as stealing, but they are mine. It's funny really, how something as small as picking flowers or posting an article in the paper can make you feel like you've won something. It's just a small victory to remind them that this is still our land, even if they've let all these people move in.

-Interview with C.B., 2021

CB stated that she continues to participate in protesting the dam and TVA's actions by telling people her story, publishing articles in the newspaper to remind people of what happened (Figure 5), and by going back to her old property and stealing flowers. These acts

of territorialization allow for CB and other displacees to assert symbolic control over the land and its resources. They dispute the current power dynamics and protest the systematic theft of the land that they believe should belong to them. By partaking in these activities, they are able to construct a highly diverse political counterfront to keep the issue of land ownership reclamation alive (Peluso and Lund 2011).

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 current 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.B., 2021

SB'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, estrangement, and anger further create issues between the displaced and their ability to interact with the Tellico landscape. The displaced continuously struggle with conflicted feelings of whether or not 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.B., 2021

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

Conclusion

In conclusion, the post-Tellico Dam landscape has become a contested place-in-the-making where feelings of territoriality have emerged between the different actors associated with the land and water. 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 methods of place-making based on the 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 fisher. The multivocal dimensions of Tellico highlight how the post-dam landscape has become a contested arena where feelings of territorialization and belonging shape how displaced individuals choose to participate with the land and water today.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of large development projects and dispossessed populations, the various types of displacement experienced by individuals and communities, and the knowledge of multivocality and territoriality of places. This study contributes to the existing scholarship on the anthropology of place and water, the anthropology of the American South and Appalachia, the political ecology of dams and dispossession, and the history of the Tennessee Valley. Because this study is the first anthropological study to examine the political ecology of the Tellico Dam, and one of the few studies to examine the impacts of a TVA project, future research is needed. This study was limited by time, but further research in Tellico could provide a clearer picture of the issues that have emerged between the dispossessed and the people who have migrated to Tellico in recent years. As the TVA continues to utilize the powers of eminent domain in 2022, further research could shed light on how dispossession today is perceived by the dispossessed, the public, and by the TVA.

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