

"MOTHER'S RIVER SONG":  
A POETIC EXPLORATION OF NATIVE PEOPLES AND  
THE NEW RIVER WITHIN THE EUROPEAN METANARRATIVE

by

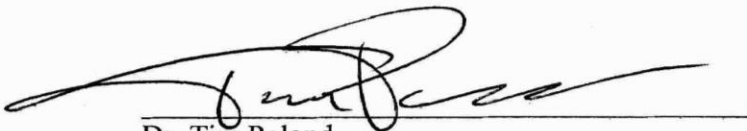
Jessica L. Mattox

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Department of English

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tim Poland

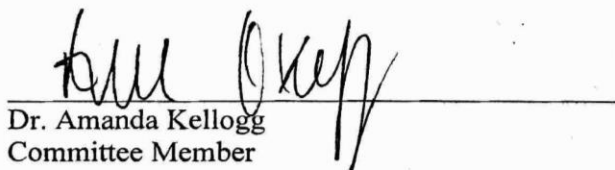
April 2018

Copyright 2018, Jessica L. Mattox



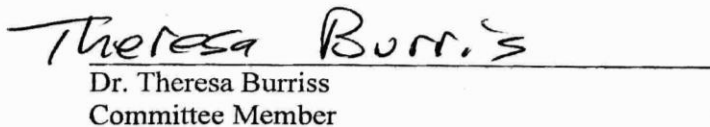
Dr. Tim Poland  
Thesis Advisor

4-19-18  
Date



Dr. Amanda Kellogg  
Committee Member

4/19/18  
Date



Dr. Theresa Burriss  
Committee Member

4-19-18  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of the graduate English faculty at Radford University. I have been privileged to work with such dedicated and knowledgeable professionals. First, I would like to thank Dr. Tim Poland for serving as my thesis advisor. From brainstorming ideas with me to reading my drafts and offering helpful insights, Dr. Poland has been an informative and encouraging mentor throughout this process. Second, I would like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Amanda Kellogg and Dr. Theresa Burriss, for offering their time, expertise, and advice as I completed this project. All three members of my thesis committee have helped me improve my written scholarship as well as my creative practices. In addition, my supportive husband, Scott, and fellow members of my MA cohort have offered invaluable encouragement, kindness, and laughter throughout the stressful second year.

Writing from the perspective of another person, time, and culture is certainly a challenge, but I have found it to be most rewarding and enlightening. At times, the poems have taken me on unexpected journeys, and just as the New River must flow at her own pace and in her own direction, the pieces themselves forged a life of their own. One of the most important parts of the process was letting Mother, my central character with whom I had the most communication, take the lead. I am indebted to her and her world. She has taught me to listen—really *listen*—and to let everything with agency speak.

This is her story.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	2
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
Begin.....	6
Skimming the New.....	7
<b>I. Surface</b> .....	9
Portrait.....	10
Lessons.....	11
Language.....	14
Air.....	16
Light.....	18
<b>II. Thin Blue Line</b> .....	19
Topographical Clashes.....	20
Currents.....	21
Fire.....	22
Blood Light.....	23
To Find Her Own.....	25
Mother Nature’s Twins.....	27
<b>III. Middle</b> .....	28
Return.....	29
Dust.....	30
Gold.....	33
Fingerprints.....	35

<b>IV. The Layers Below</b> .....	37
Cycle.....	38
Storm.....	39
River Song.....	43
<b>V. Afterword</b> .....	44
<b>VI. Works Cited</b> .....	53

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Begin**

The beetle  
raced to the edge  
of his stone vault  
with long black legs  
and a glistening black back.

He glimpsed  
the whole blue world  
below, with no wish  
but for a new  
world.

The beetle  
jumped from his stone  
perch, flying through  
the atmosphere, landing  
on the water's surface.

What would a globe  
of hidden layers  
and slippery surfaces  
do for those  
who need rest? The beetle

can float, can fly,  
can flip onto his backside  
to see the sky.

*Is the sky a world?* he asks himself.

*No*, he decides, and resolves  
to carve out a place  
for all life to play.

## Skimming the New

- I. The surface delights—  
blue skies on blue  
waves— and tears  
through hearts  
as time passes.

On sunny days  
we think it's clear.  
We skim the white-waved  
pages, read through misted  
coffee stains  
on the early morning parchment.  
Rarely do we reach  
the muddied middle  
or dark depths of night.

We find arrowheads  
and excavate them, leaving behind  
the gaps in our knowledge.

- II. Do you know  
the story of settlement?  
Jamestown, 1607. Philadelphia, 1776.

Do you know  
the story of (un)settlement?  
Jamestown (*small pox, dirty  
bodies, ground covered, eaten  
ghosts, takedown*) 1607?  
Philadelphia (*You can't  
live here, this land is  
my land, eminent  
domain*) 1776?

Water washes away blood  
but remembers anyway.  
It makes you new  
but flows by  
long after you grow old.

- III. River calls  
in lumbering sloshes and splashes  
against ancient stones  
and grassy banks

as it winds its own way,  
bonding old to New.

It warns its people  
as each crashing wave  
exposes the sharp stone edges  
below.

Pause to hear  
its voice beyond  
the surface.



**SECTION ONE**

~

**SURFACE**

**Portrait**

Mother stands  
with her two children.  
Before tending  
to her son and daughter,  
she sweeps back molasses hair  
with twine, stands in smooth  
skin of smoldering wood.  
The mother's silk black eyes  
reflect loss, confusion, strength,  
and discernment all at once.  
Father has gone  
to negotiate with the newcomers,  
to help them navigate this place  
and extend peace.

She stares into the New River,  
studying herself in its mirror,  
holding a child on each hip.  
She knows the water  
carries time in its current.

What does she see within  
the river?  
What can water  
do for her?

When it keeps moving,  
there's nothing  
it can't say. Nothing it can't  
provide.

Nothing it can stop for.

## Lessons

### I.

In order  
to stay afloat,  
young children  
learning to swim  
will ask each other  
to stand, waist deep,  
holding their backs  
with safe hands.

Weightless as the children  
are in water, they still  
feel strong and able  
when holding a friend up—  
his body stretched out  
on the surface, his face  
warmed by the sun.

### II.

As the children  
grow in height  
and confidence,  
they float  
away from each  
other's hands.

Faces still warm,  
they shift their  
focus to the side.  
Mountains flank  
the water, pull  
it taut like  
bearskin.

Losing sight of shore,  
the children begin  
to backstroke; they  
agree to divide,  
conquer, and return.

### III.

As one child  
backs around the bend,  
he is unaware  
of the serpent

eyeing him behind  
blades of grass.

The child is safer  
in the snaking river  
as it flows beneath  
him, as it guides him  
further from shore  
and closer to center.

The copperhead,  
with his oscillating  
browns and greys  
stakes his claim  
but knows not his place.  
His eyes are fixed  
on the child, and  
Sparrow watches  
them both  
below.

IV.

The copperhead  
will eventually slink  
his way to the water—  
to drink, he'll say.  
The young child,  
swimming with the current,  
directionless save for the direction  
of the water itself,  
won't notice.

But Sparrow,  
who has her eye  
on the scene, refuses  
to let the boy sink.

Though she cannot  
hold his back  
with fragile fingers  
as the child's friends  
once did, she can fly  
above the grass,  
above the trees,  
above the land  
the boy has yet to know—

perhaps her flight

will remind her  
of the glory still here; perhaps  
the boy will spy her,  
face to the sun,  
and learn  
freedom  
before he sees  
snakes.

## Language

Mother carries a letter  
to the water.  
Her eyes find foreign  
marks on the page;  
she does not understand  
and finds no use,  
so she steps into the morning mist,  
walks along the tenuous rocks  
her people know from birth.  
Treading paths, and markers, and stones  
known deep within her heart.  
She sits on the golden edge,  
slips her knowing feet  
into the still, sinking surface.

Mother asks the mist  
why it isn't translucent.  
She knows that the mist  
has a reason, that the earth  
works the way it's always  
supposed to work.

Sometimes she has to ask  
the stars why they form  
patterns—indeed, *if* the stars  
form them, or if she does.

She consults the rain,  
asks if it feeds the river,  
or if it just flows  
into the ground,  
unseen, giving life  
to all around it.  
Perhaps it does  
both.

She speaks  
to Father, and  
asks him what he knows.  
He asks her why she holds  
the letter, who it's from.  
*What are the marks on the page?*  
*Who are they for?*

She can decode the mist,  
the river, the stones, the dirt,

the grass. The earth  
tells no lies—  
it is reason and  
sense and direction.

Men, with their scribbles  
and markings,  
mark territory not their own.  
They forge paths against  
the grains of sand on the riverbank,  
against earth's rhythm, against  
the stars and what they may  
or may not say, against mist,  
  
against time.

*What are the marks on the page?  
Who are they for?*

Mother picks up a stone  
and places the page beneath.  
She knows the earth  
and its children;  
she knows the rain  
and when it will come.  
She knows it will wash away  
all marks.

**Air**

## I.

Sunrise.

Invisible breeze blows  
through trees  
at water's edge.

Sparrow flies  
against pink  
and purple sky-paint,  
through cracks  
in another dawn.

## II.

Sparrow can't count  
but she knows  
how many children  
are hers. Her wings  
gently glide overhead,  
holding air like a pocket,  
pushing against it to ride.

Below, the muddied blue  
waters glide further  
into the future  
and farther  
across the landscape.

Ripples on the surface  
vibrate like a drum,  
each flowing into rocks  
dotted within the river.

Sparrow sees her people  
standing by the water's edge,  
breathing in  
the air she has pushed  
into motion.

## III.

Sparrow hears songs  
against the night air,  
perched on the oak branch.  
The water is still  
as it reflects fire;



smoke sneaks up  
to Sparrow's nose.

The breeze  
is gentle now  
as it envelops  
the living and  
static alike.

Sparrow flies down,  
lands on a rock,  
pecks at paper  
beneath it.

She lifts her head,  
watches as the earth  
takes in  
and gives back  
its only unseen  
gift.

## Light

Mother takes a sapphire stone necklace and holds it between her fingers. She knows the stone does not belong with the others at the water's edge, knows that it is a thing of beauty when held up to the sunlight. It is the color of dream-water; it came from another place, but it looks like the stream she saw before waking. When the rain washed away the marks, it revealed this stone. Smooth, perfect, unblemished. Light—but not like the newcomers. Light like the sun that warms the land, dances on the river's surface, seeps into the underground and gives back life. Light like the promise gifted from the air each time her body trusts the earth and inhales. She never saw the sapphire adorn human skin—only the muddied bank of her trusted waters. She could let it go. She could give the light back to its source and let it ripple forward through time. She knows it is of the earth, and the earth has other plans for its children. But she wants to keep it for herself. The newcomers are so sure their vision for the land is a stone, like this one—but it's sinking sand. It will eventually return to the earth, as the newcomers will. As they *all* will. Mother is an offspring of the earth, native to this place, a gift to all she surveys—but this thing of blue beauty, though it does not belong, makes her human. She clasps it around her neck, removing her hair from the twine. One constraint for another.

**SECTION TWO**  
~  
**THIN BLUE LINE**

## Topographical Clashes

The children have gone  
 into the village, acquainting  
 themselves with hiding places  
 behind oak trees, with  
 Grandmother's mountain magic.

Mother jumps  
 into the low waves  
 and feels their cool,  
 refreshing weight.  
 She doesn't designate  
 their place just yet—

she trusts  
 she follows  
 she swims  
 ever downstream.

Mountains of time ago,  
 the water teased<sup>1</sup>  
 out its topography.  
 It chose a new direction  
 to erode  
 to bisect  
 to change.  
 The land clanged against  
 the beetle's battleground  
 and reshaped his wishes  
 for the world.

We all  
 are caught in an ancient  
 collision.  
 In a land where  
 land is all we have,  
 and who we are  
 is what we own,

she trusts  
 she follows  
 she swims.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geologist William G. Tight discovered the Teays River, an ancient body of water from which the New River originated. The Teays River “is named for the village of Teays, West Virginia” (“Teays River”).

## Currents

- I. Mother wonders  
where the white-capped waves  
began, when they  
bisected a peaceful stream and  
cast their first spell.

She knows the intruders  
are not welcome; she  
knows the river flows  
North, carving paths  
through land it can never cede;  
she knows its ancient,  
decisive moves,  
its reflection of current  
events.

- II. She opens her arms wide  
as she dives into the river  
mouth. She sees a sea  
of foreign faces on the banks:  
eyes of deep sky,  
skin of chopped  
oak trees. The river reigns  
its mountains, provides  
for the just and the unjust  
alike.

Under the white  
capped foam, starry-  
silver fish travel  
against their onyx night as  
the sun sets and  
Mother swims deeper  
into muddied uncertainty.

The water and its banks  
have lost the life  
the beetle brought.

## Fire

### I.

Mother comes up for air  
but the necklace tightens  
against her windpipe  
and almost chokes her.  
The stone still sits  
against her chest,  
color bright as ever  
but somehow not as  
beautiful as when she first  
dug it out of the mud.

The sun is at its highest peak  
and Mother peeks into  
the empty space between  
the tree limbs  
as she sits on a riverside rock.  
The spaces between  
the trees are a reminder  
of all that nature has yet  
to fill, of all that the limbs—  
in reaching toward the sky—  
still need to say.

### II.

The embers of last night's  
fire died with the sunrise,  
and now the pile of ashes  
sits between trees,  
a reminder of all that has  
burned and passed  
into the sky.

Many fires burn across  
the land each night. And  
each night, like the one  
before it, they eventually  
pass away. The warmth  
of the sun seems to take  
its place, but Mother  
knows the rotations  
of day and night,  
of the seasons,  
of life.

She knows the sun will not always be warm enough.

## Blood Light

I.

River wants to capture  
Sun, but she can  
only catch him  
between flowing fingers  
for a moment,  
as he uses her

to im-prism  
the light into colors.  
Sun seeks her  
when it suits him,  
and together  
they make diamonds  
on the surface. He

makes her brighter,  
fills her blue veins,  
seeps past  
the planes of glass  
on her surface  
like a refracted ribbon.

II.

To her, the horizon  
is a door that swings  
open, shut, open  
and shut each day,  
saying "Goodbye"  
every night, and night  
in its own way reaches  
to her with cold fingers,  
as if to comfort her  
and give her the light  
of the moon and the stars  
to get her through  
until day-love  
comes again.

She wonders why  
they can't always  
be together. She knows  
night must borrow  
from Sun—*her*  
Sun—so the world  
can rest, can pause,

even as it revolves  
around her lover.

III.

In the morning,  
she holds his ray-hand;  
they walk the tightrope  
between warmth  
and burning. At noon,  
his light sears the shoulders  
of the child whose skin  
knows not his  
wrath.

*Why?* she asks.

In the clouds,  
he rests his  
red eye beneath  
the safe white pillows;  
on the land, though,  
she has no such  
resting place.

On the land,  
blood flows  
from life dependent  
on her lover, and  
all he will do  
is watch  
with his red  
eye.



### To Find Her Own

Up the bank,  
on top of a steep hill  
she climbed as a child,  
Mother sees a deer.  
Its obsidian-black eyes, blank  
saucers seeking  
its own herd,  
meet hers.

The deer takes a step  
closer. Mother does  
not extend her hand;  
clutching the stone  
closer, she  
nods imperceptibly.

Footsteps crunching  
the dead  
leaves to be thrown  
in tonight's fire  
come from the forest  
behind.

Mother stiffens  
her back, shifts  
her eyes to the sound.  
A ray of light  
bounces off the sapphire,  
points to the deer.

A blast of thunder  
in broad daylight  
shakes the grass,  
whirls the leaves,  
kills the animal.

Mother races up  
the hill, leaps  
over the little foot-holes  
children must use.

She falls to the deer's  
side, placing leaves  
over its lifeless body.

The newcomers trudge  
over, push her aside,  
and wrangle up the animal.  
One man's eyes  
settle on Mother's  
stone as his partner  
begins to drag the deer.

The watchful man  
lifts his hand  
to his heart  
but his eyes  
will not meet  
the brown stones  
of Mother's gaze.

The men leave  
Mother within  
the trees' empty spaces.  
She watches the leaves  
fall, covering the resting place.  
Unclasping the necklace, she lays  
the stone where the deer was slain.

A thin blue line  
against spilled rubies  
over cloud-like fur.  
Mother slowly stands and takes  
her leave  
to find her own.

### **Mother Nature's Twins**

Wind wants to provide, but Breeze wants to subside. Breeze would retreat unto herself—singing only when the sun shines— but Wind wants to pull elements together, sluice through dust, and reign from age to age. He longs for an unsullied world—to sail over the soft grass and make it whisper, to ripple against the water and make it dance to another tune. If he could, he'd always act like his sister. He loves to lift Sparrow and her kin; he swirls smoke against Night's sky and absorbs its ashes. His brusque dance vibrates against the Earth, making music in his singular register. He scales mountains as he sings in higher and higher octaves, while his legs sweep below to give all creatures air.

But deep down, Wind wants Earth, his bride, all to himself. Usually, his sister, Breeze, can tiptoe softly over and under and against humanity. She sashays against the people's skin, makes them believe she's their lover. Breeze is a refreshing spirit, the pride of Mother Nature. She sings sweetly; like the newcomer's Prince of Peace, she is easy and her burden is light—for a time.

When the siblings get sick from people, they grow impatient. Breeze will defer to her brother should Sister-in-Law be taken for granted. Wind will then take its lover by force. Breeze may bounce against people for a time, but Wind is unafraid to tear through them.

**SECTION THREE**  
~  
**MIDDLE**

**Return**

Beetle bounces  
from era to era.  
All he wanted—  
still wants—  
is play.

The beetle cannot  
bore into the brains  
of the intruder, cannot  
eat the greed or lies  
away, nor make himself  
a place to stay.

The beetle  
drowns white  
dreams; he will make  
new worlds  
old again.

## Dust

I. *Ashes to ashes,*  
 the newcomer tells  
 her. The sun rises.  
 He draws  
 flames  
 in the sand that refused  
 to sink  
 into the river.  
*Dust to dust. For dust*  
*you are and to dust*  
*you will return.*

Mother holds a collection  
 of paper bound in a smooth  
 cover—easily the skin of  
 Mother Nature’s slain  
 son—left on the rock  
 she sits on  
 each dawn. He holds  
 open the page  
 he wants her to read,  
 but his voice refracts  
 against the river,  
 bouncing back  
 to himself.

II. *Dust*, he calls it.  
 Something one  
 disdains  
 and discards.  
*Dust* dashes out  
 the side of his mouth,  
 sharpens his clacking  
 tongue. With each word,  
 his face flames  
 like the fire  
 of which he speaks—  
 one the river  
 cannot put out.

*Ashes.*  
 The only ones  
 she knows  
 come after  
 wood and warmth  
 make love to the air

and give birth to her  
 again and again  
 each day. But he  
 will not speak  
 of those. *Hell.*  
 Did he bring it? Where  
 is it? The word rings against  
 the air around her—  
 but she can feel Wind  
 tossing it into oblivion.  
*Heaven.* Is this not  
 the place?  
*Amen.*

*Amen.* It forms  
 its shape on her  
 mouth, opens  
 a door without  
 her permission.

III. When they speak,  
 Mother sees hollow  
 holes and empty  
 hands pressed together;  
 she hears  
 phantom covenants  
 made on nothing  
 but the dust  
 thrown into the air

when he and his people  
 dig in the sacred dirt  
 of her family's  
 final returning place.

IV. Mother knows  
 the life Mother Nature made  
 has an end.  
 She knows  
 the newcomer  
 speaks truth  
 about their bodies.

But his voice  
 has no music.  
 It thrusts itself  
 upon the earth.  
 It doesn't blend

with the river's rhythm  
beneath her feet; it won't  
yield to Sparrow's wings,  
or Deer's life, or her own  
presence.

She digs  
and she digs  
but she'll never  
find the thing  
they want her  
to find.



**Gold**

A hundred years  
have passed  
since the first  
ships came.  
Those men  
went on to chase  
wonder-dust;  
the natives  
instructed them to go by  
a different route, to  
follow the star  
only white men  
can see. *Wise*

isn't what Captain  
would call them—  
after all, they  
took Christopher  
at his word  
when he told them  
stories of the bosom-  
shaped world.

Oh, Captain  
knows better.  
He stores up  
the treasures  
of *this* land  
in his heart.

He thrusts the pickaxe  
into the dirt,  
taps at an old  
explorer's dream.  
Captain knows  
this dig would turn  
his hands to gold  
as it turns the world  
around.

Cool sweat drips  
down his side,  
into leather boots  
weathered by the sun's  
red eyes. The axe

is only silver,  
but he and his crew  
dream in gold.

The sun's wings  
flutter against  
the metal, play  
tricks on Captain's  
mind as the hole  
increases in value.

But Sun  
knows gold  
flim-flams against  
pressure, falters  
where bronze and iron  
dig and dig and dig.

## Fingerprints

I. Two days  
ago, it rained.  
River thanked  
Sun as he  
took his exit  
for the day,  
letting his servant  
Cloud pour out on  
River's slippery glass  
surface, bathing  
her and Earth  
in a cosmic wash.

II. Mother's boy  
collects the clay  
left by the bank,  
brings it to the kiln.  
He watches Mother  
as she pulls her hair  
back, ties  
the twine  
he saw around her neck  
before the rain.

Son sits  
on the small chair  
his father built;  
he sets the formless  
lump on the wheel.

Mother guides  
his hands against  
the malleable mush—  
Son leaves imprint  
after imprint, watches  
each one rise  
and die away.

III. The clay takes shape  
only because his  
mother sits behind him—  
like the shelter of a tree,  
she holds her long arms  
and rounded fingers out  
like branches  
waiting to be lifted

by the growth  
of a seed she planted  
long ago.

At each  
stop  
of the wheel,  
Mother knows  
their fingers  
will never  
make this shape  
again, knows  
their intentions  
will dry  
against the hardened  
clay  
when it returns  
to its Earth.

IV. The boy sees his first  
bowl, lifts it  
off the wheel,  
feels the feather  
of his mother's fingers  
as they fill  
the spaces left  
by his own.

Together, they hold  
a new creation.

Only Mother  
notes the whorls  
and the ridges  
her boy  
left behind.

**SECTION FOUR**  
~  
**THE LAYERS BELOW**

## Cycle

Baby beetle bounces up  
from the holes  
in the earth,  
left behind  
by pickaxes  
of alien metal.

As he reaches  
the top,  
he remembers  
his father's wish—

but the world  
only plays  
tricks,

and creatures  
great and small  
only seek  
prey.

As he inches  
his way  
to the top  
of the oak,  
he takes in

the mountaintops,  
and the silent curve  
of the river.

*You will get  
your wish, he  
vows. Even  
if I must carve  
it out  
myself.*

## Storm

I.

When Sun struck  
his final position  
over River, it was  
Mother alone  
who saw  
and understood  
the time had come.

*Enough*, Mother told Sun.

He was thirsty  
for River, and took  
one final sip  
before retreating and  
hiding his spirit  
in a tomb, sliding

behind the trees,  
abiding by the new  
law of his land.

When Breeze rippled  
over River, and Wind  
threw a tantrum  
chasing the white  
man from his people's  
bones, Mother opened

her arms wide,  
twine holding hair  
as it blew,  
and said, *Enough*.

Breeze and Wind  
crawled away  
behind the white  
man's wall, sunk  
into the roots  
of the trees,  
giving up their spirit  
to bones long left behind.

The air was still.

On and on  
 Mother went.  
*Enough*, she told Cloud.  
*Enough*, she told Rain.  
*Enough*, she told Sky.

II.

For Sun  
 has given his light  
 and his approbation  
 to alien metal  
 and stone, clothing  
 them in glitter  
 before human eyes.

For Breeze welcomed  
*them* to shore and  
 wrapped her short, sweet  
 fingers around their shoulders,  
 seeping into their skin  
 and lulling them to sleep  
 in a land  
 that is not their own.

For Wind  
 only filled *them*  
 with false ownership,  
 and then they built  
 walls to keep Mother  
 and her tribe  
 out.

For Cloud shaded  
*them*, and rain cooled  
*them* when it should  
 have washed the land  
 clean.

For Sky  
 betrayed them all  
 by giving his  
 color to *them*  
 through their eyes.

*Only River will flow*, Mother orders.  
*For only river*  
*knows pain—*  
*she can never stop*



*flowing for anyone,  
 never stop opening  
 her arms wide,  
 never stop offering  
 her banks like a bosom,  
 never stop sheltering  
 Sparrow, Deer, Son  
 Father, Serpent—  
 or white man.*

*She will always  
 carry time  
 in her current,  
 and I am her sister.*

III.

Why won't you, Sun,  
 partner with Sky, Cloud,  
 and Rain to create the storm?  
 Why won't Breeze and Wind  
 crescendo together into  
 thunder and lightning?  
 Why won't the elements  
 collude into a coda  
 over the River,  
 who holds and serves  
 us all?

*Why won't they heal us?*

IV.

Mother knows now  
 that the twine is all  
 that holds her  
 together; it is from  
 another time, another  
 place. The ground  
 beneath her feet may  
 declare this is the place  
 she's always stood—  
 but she's no longer in  
 it.

Now she  
 is the storm.  
 A front forever  
 colliding into  
 captains, a stroke

of lightening upon  
forts where  
Sun cannot shine,  
a purple-gray  
cloud passing into  
an active eternity  
of resistance.

**River Song**

River runs  
into ditches  
of dirt, making mud.  
River out-runs  
her sun into  
holes hanging  
about with  
dust, and her gush  
animates the old  
that becomes new  
if only  
one will look.

## Afterword

Through the lens of the New River, this creative thesis considers the ways in which ownership, tradition, modernity, and the European metanarrative function within tribes native to southwest Virginia. Constructed as a cycle of poems, the thesis utilizes postcolonial and ecocritical literary theories to contend with its central questions: How do scientific elements of the New River—natural, biological, and geological—represent its cultural significance, particularly in terms of native peoples? How have native cultures shaped the personality of the New River—and vice versa? To explore these relationships, I utilized the sedimentary layers of the New River as a structural organization of the poems in order to explore the suffering experienced and survival achieved by native peoples. In using the genre of poetry to explore the relationship between native culture and the New River’s geographical history, I incorporate literary devices—such as personification, sharp imagery, and wordplay—to showcase both micro and macro issues inherent to colonialism within a specific place.

In his 1998 work, *Fantasies of the Master Race*, Ward Churchill explicates how the macro impacts of colonialism inform the response of the oppressed on a micro level. In the chapter “Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians,” Churchill charts the progression of colonization from initial conquest to subversion of native culture. Physical domination of Native American cultures—through means such as land seizures, broken treaties, grave robbing, and dissemination of disease—is only the beginning in a centuries-long process of moral justification. As Churchill states, “Mere conquest is never the course of empire” (10). Ultimately, colonialism sought (and continues to seek, as it remains a systemic issue) to gain “hegemony of truth and knowledge” (Churchill 14). Over the course of United States history, this metanarrative of white superiority and the privileged status of Western philosophy have morphed into new permutations—much like a virus—masquerading as

different justifications at different times for specific colonial purposes. Manifest Destiny, pseudoscience, “authenticity,” the civil/savage binary, and even the concept of the “noble savage” have all become part of the American lexicon and collective consciousness; each one serves as a colonial “code” for the ultimate goal to eradicate native people and their culture for the supposed “betterment and progress” of the United States of America. In reality, colonizers came to the conclusion—or decided to enforce the idea for the sake of political agenda—that “Indians can never be modern,” and, therefore, must be gradually phased out (O’Brien xi). Throughout history, the process of colonization has remained slow, steady, and dangerous. Churchill furthers this idea of non-modernity for the American Indian in his own scholarship: “When fact and fiction fuse into an intentionally homogenous whole, mythology becomes the norm” (2). This movement toward “an intentionally homogenous whole”—as well as the idea that Native Americans need to be “saved” from a land and culture of their own origin—pervades this thesis. The main character, Mother, has a unique perspective on and struggle with this issue, primarily via her exploration of the New River and its immediate natural surroundings.

Incorporating the stylistic strategy of geologic layering throughout the poems in this thesis complicates the readers understanding of and relationship with both natural and human life. The specificity of place safeguards against mythologizing the natives of Virginia’s New River Valley; in addition, it gives a *name* to each layer of their immediate experience and environment. In most Western literature, natives do not possess any agency or voice *of their own*, which can contribute to their dehumanization (Churchill 4-5, 8). Throughout the cycle of poems, both the native voice *and* the voice of surrounding nature (i.e., animals and elements) dictate the story and possess narrative power. The introduction to this collection contains two poems: “Begin” and “Skimming the New.” In order to encourage in the reader

an appreciation of the complex symbiosis between native people and nature, these introductory poems invite the reader into the collection by means of spatial and sociocultural orientation. These poems invite the reader to “explore” by means of observation—*not* conquest or authentication—the distinctive peoples, forces of nature, and concrete settings in which their events take place. Both “Begin” and “Skimming the New” introduce the first step in natural and ecological cycles of life; the beetle in “Begin” is based off the water beetle in a Cherokee creation myth, and the river’s song in “Skimming the New” simply *continues*—it cannot be said to have a clear beginning or end. These poems call the reader to bear witness to an entire ecological system—one that is always and already in progress.

Section I, entitled *Surface*, begins at a point in time during which the native people of southwest Virginia are experiencing relative sovereignty and strength. Although it is impossible to reach back and conceptualize a true “pre-colonial” period (before the arrival of European “explorers”), *Surface* depicts the scene of a native family as they peacefully navigate everyday life. Although “Portrait,” the very first poem of the section, paints an idyllic scene, its tone already sounds the alarm of colonial trouble to come: “Father has gone/ to negotiate with the newcomers, /to help them navigate this place/ and extend peace.” While holding her two children alone, Mother gazes into the surface of the river, regarding it as the center of her family and tribal life. She uses it as a touchstone for her growing instinctual anxiety: “She knows the water/ carries time in its current.”

Throughout *Surface*, each poem is rooted in innocence; yet, this innocence is constantly challenged and encroached upon. From the young swimmers in “Lessons” to the foreign markings Mother finds in “Language,” the characters face subtle, growing threats to their way of life. As Mother reads the “newcomers” language in the letter left by her home, her pre-colonial worldview begins to change: “*What are the marks on the page? / Who are*

*they for?*” Even though the river will never change its nature, Mother knows that the river *will* reflect any changes brought about by the people around it. Its unceasing flow is a comfort, but the backdrop of change existing behind it is uncertain. The shifts in culture that Mother and her tribe would notice at this point are not what Churchill would deem “cutting edge” or “hardcore,” as the white explorers have not physically displaced or eliminated the natives—yet (10).

As the poems flow into the next layer, *Thin Blue Line*, the initial, tentative interactions between the native people and European settlers become choppier—both literally and figuratively. This section allows for a more in-depth and nuanced portrait of early colonial interactions. In “Topographical Clashes,” Mother begins to experience the weight of uncertainty as the agenda of the “newcomers” becomes clear. While Mother still trusts the river she has known and relied upon her entire life—one that has served as a central point of the land for her people for generations—she begins to question these new, colonial ideas of property and ownership. As she does this, the New River is personified to have chosen “a new direction”—one that, as is foreshadowed, Mother will have difficulty navigating. The river is personified in this way to demonstrate the confusion Mother faces as she intuitively detects an unnatural force in her native land. However, she cannot, at this point, know the extent of its eventual reach. Throughout the rest of the section, particularly in “Fire,” “Blood Light,” and “Mother Nature’s Twins,” the personification of nature continues, providing agency to the native through a championing of her culture’s deferment to nature and place. Through this use of non-Western cosmology, Mother’s world begins to take shape and is humanized.

The final two sections, entitled *Middle* and *The Layers Below*, address the raw emotions that accompany the depersonalization and mythologizing of the native peoples in

and around the New River Valley. At this point, the natural balance of the native world—particularly their *place*, which is sacred to them—has been violated and torn from their grasp. The Cherokee creation water beetle makes his appearance once again at the beginning of *Middle*, hungering for “white dreams” as he seeks to “make new worlds old again.” This desire is also present in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel, *Ceremony*, in which the main character, Tayo, seeks tribal healing from colonization and the “Lie” he has been asked to accept. Silko’s “Lie” refers to the Western metanarrative of white superiority and the mythology of the native. Although Tayo has already been exposed to Churchill’s idea of the “cutting edge” and “hard core” of colonial empire, his eventual healing through tribal ceremony is similar to Mother’s persistence to remain ever tied to her land, culture, and people (10).

Even when encountering the misguided missionary in “Dust,” Mother questions any attempt to challenge or supersede her truth. Mother intuits that this man is not on a search for syncretism; he wants to eradicate her culture—her very personhood—and replace it with his own. The following poems, “Gold” and “Fingerprints,” extend the digging metaphor at the end of “Dust” by juxtaposing two different approaches to the Earth’s gift of dirt. In “Gold,” the white captain is certain he will find the treasure he seeks and be able to build a legacy on material wealth in this “new” world. However, the personification of nature appears in the last two stanzas of the poem, foreshadowing the earth’s resistance to this unnatural pursuit. In “Fingerprints,” Mother and her son work together to craft a clay bowl, surely an object and experience they both will treasure. However, Mother is imparting to her son the impermanence of their dominion over the earth, and knows that any “legacy” they may leave does not render them immortal. Mother and her tribe *serve* the earth as it serves them, unlike the newcomers with whom they struggle to coexist.



Serving as the final section, *The Layers Below* uses the rough, often treacherous bottom of the New River as a metaphor for the obstacles native people have had to face in the wake of colonization. At this point in the collection, Mother and her tribe are no longer mere observers of the newcomers or potential changes to their way of life; they must live in the midst of—and find a way to actively resist—those changes. The Western European metanarrative has a strong pull, but, in the end, Mother and the entire ecosystem that surrounds her maintain a centripetal movement toward their center. All elements of Mother’s world come together in “Storm” to purify the land of toxic colonialism and whiteness, much like the ceremony at the center of Silko’s novel.

The poems in *The Layers Below* seek to complicate the European metanarrative in order to establish Native Americans as people with a complex, modern, and deeply human presence. Although Mother does not succeed in eliminating the colonizers or the effects of colonialism from her homeland (as this is impossible to do), she does achieve acceptance of her role as both ambassador for her community and an active resistant to the encroaching metanarrative. Paradoxically, in focusing on the development of one main character throughout these pieces, numerous macro-level issues presented themselves. Though one character could—and should—never speak for an entire culture or population, the poignancy and nuances of native experience begin to take shape through Mother’s eyes.

In addition to the sedimentary layers of the New River—which represent physical and sociocultural changes throughout early native history—each section utilizes personification of natural elements. In order to showcase the drastic changes of colonialism, an ecocritical approach to the New River provided necessary support as I crafted this cycle of poems. These poems resemble the 1980’s stage of ecocriticism that Scott Slovic terms “nature and wilderness writing” (11). However, the poems, of course, are dealing with both nature *and*

the native human's response to it. Although the poems centered on non-human entities utilize personification, their tone is not anthropocentric. In "Mother Nature's Twins," Breeze and Wind, for example, do not seek to please or destroy humanity. Although their effect on humanity may be a byproduct of their goals, the Breeze and Wind are decidedly separate from their human counterparts—especially those seeking temporary wealth from land and resources.

Postcolonial theorist JanMohamed introduced the idea of the Manichean allegory, which is defined as "...[the] opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native," encompassing "...a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object" (63). These binaries define the functions of the European metanarrative in American society. As a result, JanMohamed warns his contemporaries that even postcolonial scholars are often pulled in by its underlying presence in the culture's consciousness.

In terms of the Manichean allegory's manifestation in colonialist literature, JanMohamed establishes two overarching categorizations—the "imaginary" and "symbolic" (65-66). Those texts within the imaginary category are fixated on and fetishize the native as a generic commodity. In JanMohamed's view, these texts operate out of "objectification and aggression" (65). Imaginary texts caricature the native, immediately placing him within the "evil"—read: *oppressed*—underside of the binaries that dictate the Manichean allegory. The author of imaginary texts is not interested in mutual, syncretic solutions; rather, he/she seeks to maintain the "nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native" (JanMohamed 65). The native voice is silenced in order to mythologize and, eventually,

dehumanize him/her for the purpose of perpetuating the privileged, colonial culture. Because the Manichean allegory is “based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference,” texts in the imaginary category necessarily require the author to “retreat... to the homogeneity of his own group” in order to maintain colonial order (JanMohamed 61, 66).

While authors of texts in the symbolic category *do* tend to mythologize the native *less*, they are still susceptible to the “power relations” inherent to the Manichean binaries—particularly those that promote “the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native”—upon which colonial society is founded (JanMohamed 63). Within the symbolic category of texts, authors either attempt or resist syncretic solutions (JanMohamed 66). Although pursuing syncretic solutions in postcolonial texts would appear to create societal harmony, the unfortunate result is further emphasis on the “Otherness” of the native (JanMohamed 66). JanMohamed explains the phenomenon in this way: “[Authors who do not attempt syncretic solutions] realize... that syncretism is impossible within the power relations of colonial society because such a context traps the writer in a libidinal economy of the ‘imaginary’” (66). If a symbolic author can step outside of his/her own perspective and examine the potentially imaginary elements of his/her writing, JanMohamed argues that this “rigorous examination of the ‘imaginary’” can help the author “free [his/her text] from the manichean allegory” (66).

The ultimate paradigm shift—“genuine and thorough comprehension of otherness”—can only occur if “[...] the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideologies of [dominant American] culture” (JanMohamed 65). As a woman of European descent who calls the New River Valley of southwest Virginia home, I cannot speak on behalf of any native person. While I can account for my own physical

experience and cultural knowledge of the New River, I cannot conflate these with an understanding of the Cherokee relationship to this river. In acknowledging the presence of JanMohamed's Manichean allegory, I do not seek to "represent" or "authenticate" native culture through superficial syncretic solutions. Rather, I present my cycle of poems as an honest observation of historical events, geological phenomena, and individual people or tribes that have inspired, moved, or taught me.

Through this cycle of poems, I have attempted to approach JanMohamed's "genuine and thorough comprehension of otherness" (65). Both the sociocultural and environmental elements of the New River have grown over time. Yet, the river is an enduring presence in the landscape of southwest Virginia, which makes it a suitable backdrop for the study of indigenous nature.

### Works Cited

Churchill, Ward. "Literature and the Colonization of American Indians." *Fantasies of the*

*Master Race*, City Light Books, 1998. Accessed on Radford University D2L.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in

Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 59-87.

O'Brien, Jean M. "Introduction." *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in*

*New England*, U of Minnesota P, 2010, pp. xi-xxvi. Accessed on Radford University D2L.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin Books, 1986.

Slovic, Scott. "Ecocriticism 101: A Basic Introduction to Ecocriticism and Environmental

Literature." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 23, 2015, pp.

1-14.

"Teays River." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 16 Feb. 2018,

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teays\\_River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teays_River).