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

by

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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

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April 2018

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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

Acknowledgments ..............................................................................................................2

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................3

Introduction ..........................................................................................................................5

Begin .....................................................................................................................................6

Skimming the New .................................................................................................................7

I. Surface ...............................................................................................................................9

Portrait ..................................................................................................................................10

Lessons .................................................................................................................................11

Language ...............................................................................................................................14

Air .........................................................................................................................................16

Light ....................................................................................................................................18

II. Thin Blue Line ..................................................................................................................19

Topographical Clashes .......................................................................................................20

Currents ................................................................................................................................21

Fire .......................................................................................................................................22

Blood Light ...........................................................................................................................23

To Find Her Own ................................................................................................................25

Mother Nature’s Twins .........................................................................................................27

III. Middle .............................................................................................................................28

Return ...................................................................................................................................29

Dust .....................................................................................................................................30

Gold .....................................................................................................................................33

Fingerprints ..........................................................................................................................35
IV. The Layers Below.........................................................................................37
  Cycle..............................................................................................................38
  Storm............................................................................................................39
  River Song....................................................................................................43
V. Afterword......................................................................................................44
VI. Works Cited..................................................................................................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?

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\(^1\)
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.

\(^1\) 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 caricaturize 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


