

**Who Belongs? Insiders and Outsiders in Lee
Smith's *Oral History***

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The Appalachian region is a region of complexity. There is not one definitive Appalachian culture. As John Alexander Williams notes, in his book *Appalachia: A History*, "Appalachia is a territory of images.... The region has been seen as the essence of America and a place apart, ⁴a strange land and a peculiar people" (8-9). It is a canvas upon which individuals have projected their fears, hopes, regrets and enthusiasms about American past and present. In *Oral History*, Lee Smith's narrative structure reflects this cultural layering. Smith's novel is essentially a frame tale told from thirteen different points of view: seven are first person oral narratives and one is a first person narrative journal mingled amongst four pieces told by third person narrators. Each voice has a unique purpose and motivation for sharing his or her addition to the Cantrell family history that comes to focus on Dory Cantrell as the central character. Ironically, Dory does not have a narrative of her own in the novel, affirming her separateness within her own community.

Smith employs multiple narrators to allow the reader a view of Appalachia from the outsiders, those not assimilated into the region, as well as the insiders' viewpoints. This narrative strategy constructs place, reveals the process of othering in cultures and also provides a glimpse that the power of belonging somewhere holds in identity formation. Each character in the novel, regardless of sex or community status, is longing for something more than the familiar as they search to find the place to which they belong. This factor, which post-modern critic Bonnie Winsbro in the article "A Witch

and Her Curse: External Definition and Uncrossable Boundaries in Lee Smith's *Oral History*" describes as "the curse of desiring an alternative way of life that... they are powerless to attain" (46), unites all the characters as they share their narratives with the readers. However, there are clear distinctions made between the voices. Smith's use of insider and outsider narratives highlights the idea of belonging, and the omission of Dory's (who is the main character) narrative voice casts her as an outsider within her hometown of Black Cove.

The frame for this novel consists of a young woman, Jennifer Bingham, traveling to Black Cove on an assignment from her college professor to collect her family's oral history. Jennifer's mother, Pearl, was born in Black Cove of the Appalachian Mountains but moved out of the region to attend college at East Tennessee State University and married someone from Abingdon, Tennessee. In Abingdon, her husband was an upholsterer and she took a position as a high school art teacher. The frame immediately introduces us to the Appalachian region from an outsider's perspective because Jennifer has never lived near or known her relatives from Black Cove. Jennifer's view of this backward family, whom "all her life, she looked down on," (Smith 16) creates a tension about identity and belonging from the beginning of the novel that will carry throughout the plot.

It is important to note that Jennifer is traveling on her college professor's recommendation and interest (the college professor to whom she is attracted and will eventually marry), *not* because of her own honest attraction to her mother's family and the Appalachian region. She initially shared the story of Pearl's, her mother, family homestead supposedly being haunted "laughing [and over a drink after class one day], to

show she was embarrassed because she was even so slightly related to people like that" (Smith 17). Her family, especially her step-grandmother, Ora Mae, is aware of Jennifer's insincere intentions. Although Jennifer attempts to be sweet and caring toward her family after arriving in Black Cove because she realizes the "people are so sweet.. .so kind" (Smith 16), her family rejects her because they are offended by the fact that Jennifer is studying them for a college assignment on the first and only time she has ever visited them. Ora Mae's last words to Jennifer are, "Don't you ever come back here no more with no tape recorder because if you set it going up there, you'll likely hear what you don't want to hear" (Smith 282). Ora Mae rejects Jennifer and her college assignment with these words, but she also warns Jennifer that she may not be pleased with what she discovers in this region; she may not be prepared for the absolute truth.

To collect the information Jennifer had needed for her assignment, she placed a tape recorder in the old Cantrell family homestead, the supposed haunted house. Ora Mae's comments to Jennifer about this research are revealing about the relationship between insiders and outsiders to the Appalachian region in two ways. The first is that those who reside in the region as insiders are not fond of outsiders who come into the region and view the culture and the people as something to be studied. Ora Mae's statement also reveals that outsiders who come into the region and view it without assimilating into the culture will never truly comprehend the way of the land and its people - assimilation, in this case, meaning to accept the traditions of the dominant culture and make them a part of their own daily living. Even those who respectfully enjoy and consider the culture, such as Richard Burlage, cannot entirely come to an understanding of the Appalachian culture.

Outsiders see and hear things that they will refuse to believe as true simply because it is too foreign to their mainstream thinking process, or because it shatters the perception they have projected onto Appalachia. As Suzanne W. Jones, who focuses on the juxtaposition of insider/outsider narratives within *Oral History*, states, "Even direct contact with her mountain family does not correct Jennifer's naive, stereotyped view. To adjust for complexity, she simply omits for her report what does not fit her expectations" (102). When Jennifer sees her little cousin Suzy Q's phosphorescent finger nail polish she is surprised by the modernity of the sight, but she does not include this in her college report. Instead she chooses only to report on the instances that fit her previous point of view, such as the mysterious noises in the old homestead and Little Luther Wade singing on the front porch. With the instances that shock Jennifer and alter her rustic, primitive view of Appalachia, she reshapes them within her own mind. For example, as Jennifer is leaving, her Uncle Al tongue kisses her, which initially disgusts and frightens her. However, by the time she parks her car in front of the dorm, Jennifer has decided that, "Al is nothing but a big old bully, a joker, after all" (Smith 284). Jennifer has taken the sights and stories she heard in Hoot Owl Holler and formed her own opinion about the people and the region just as all individuals do: we take information from our experiences and mold it into personal perceptions, fitting neatly into preconceptions.

Smith intentionally provides an unexpected twist in the plot with Uncle Al's overt affection for his niece as she returns to college, and she also intentionally allows Jennifer to re-craft the scene in her mind. The purpose for this narrative incident is to show an inside/outside relationship not only between residents of Hoot Owl Holler and those traveling into the area, but also between men and women within the text. As the novel

progresses, certain women from within Hoot Owl Holler will be cast as others within their own patriarchal community because they do not fit into the prevailing expectations of the community. Just as Smith sets up the traditional insider/outsider controversy with Jennifer and her family from the Appalachian region, Smith also uses the frame to suggest the conflict that will arise for certain women within this region. The frame story forms only a small part of the novel; the majority of *Oral History* is the multiple stories collected on Jennifer's tape recorder that reveal her family's history. However, the frame is very important because it reflects the struggles of belonging and insider/outsider relationships in the region over fifty years ago, and how those same difficulties exist in a contemporary society.

The stories within the frame are divided into three sections; each section illustrating the influence of dreams and desires across the generations. Rosalind B. Reilly another structuralist critic, but one who focuses on the symbols of circles and dreams within the novel, explains that all three sections follow a similar pattern representing the fact that dreams exist within all generations, and each individual must survive the making or breaking of their dreams (*"Oral History: The Enchanted Circle of Narrative and Dream"*). Each section contains one primary narrative voice: the first is Granny Younger, the second Richard Burlage, and the third is Sally. According to Harriette C. Buchanan who is unimpressed with the story of *Oral History* but is impressed with Smith's manipulation of point of view, these three characters receive the role of primary narration because of their relationship to Dory's story and the family curse. Granny Younger provides the family background and tells about the curse of Red Emmy; her story ends with Dory's birth. Sally tells about Dory's death and about the working out of the curse

in Maggie and Pearl's lives (Dory's twins by Richard Burlage). Richard's story occurs between the voices of Granny Younger and Sally, and recounts his struggle with his love for Dory and his inability to reach out and touch any more than her body; despite their physical relationship, he can never understand her (337). Dory is the center of the novel and the family history because as Buchanan says "she most clearly represents the family's yearning for something beyond themselves" (338) - she does this as an Appalachian resident, a woman and from the universal aspect of human nature.

Granny Younger shares an oral narrative of experiential wisdom from an insider's perspective in order to, as post-modern critic Paula Gallant Eckard says, "Evoke the past" (122). Her position as midwife gives her an intimate view of the community. At the beginning of her narrative she says, "I know moren most folks and that's a fact, you can ask anybody. I know moren I want to tell you, and moren you want to know" (Smith 27). With this statement at the beginning of Granny Younger's story, readers are immediately put in a position of questioning how much of the truth Granny will reveal, and are reminded of Ora Mae's warning in the frame that Jennifer will see and hear more than she wants. Ora Mae's statement is directed toward Jennifer; however, with its repetition in Granny Younger's narrative and the directive pronoun "you," readers can infer the warning is intended for all outsiders who venture into Appalachia.

Granny Younger's narrative is positioned as the first voice because it provides the historical background about the Cantrells and the legend surrounding this family. This history begins with Almarine as a young boy longing for something that he didn't have: "Almarine allus wanting something - who knows what? - and that's why he kept staring out beyond them hills" (Smith 31). Longing is a motif throughout the novel. Almarine's

longing foreshadows the longing that will be the eventual cause of death for his daughter, Dory. The difference between Almarine and Dory's desire is that Almarine is able to pursue his. He leaves Black Cove and goes into the outside world. Returning five years later, without telling a soul about his experiences out there, Almarine was ready to dedicate his life entirely to Hoot Owl Holler in Black Cove. After his return, Granny Younger describes his relationship with the land by saying, "Truly this holler is so much a part of Almarine that he doesn't think of owning it, not any moren a man would think of owning his own arm not yet one of his legs" (Smith 32). The relationship that Granny describes between Almarine and the land represents a true insider's view of the Appalachian region. Dory, however, seems to feel trapped in or isolated in Hoot Owl Holler. She wants to be able to experience something more, leading to her attraction for Richard Burlage, which will eventually lead to the community's view of Dory as an "other," an outsider.

As Granny Younger sets up the history of the Cantrell family with all of its surrounding folklore, she often tells side stories about the economic situation of the region with the lumber company coming in, of the traditions about marriage and burial, and of mountain superstitions. The story is a mix of the realistic situation of Black Cove and of the mystery of Appalachia, cultural beliefs dependent on supernatural, mystical approaches rather than tactical ones, which cannot always be explained. For example, Granny tells of Almarine's first marriage to Emmy Harris, a real marriage but with the supernatural element attached that Emmy Harris is thought to be a witch by the Black Cove community. Granny recounts one instance where Emmy revealed herself as a witch to Granny's own eyes: "Red Emmy turned her head away from her kissing one time, once

only, and looked at me directly where I was hid. The lightning flashes right then and I see her face and it is old, old. It is older and meaner time. Red Emmy stares me right in the eyes and she spits one time on the rainy ground" (Smith 52). Granny's account of the marriage makes the reader uncomfortable, as surely there are no witches. However, such doubts only add to the mystery because the reader is not able to fathom a clear depiction of Emmy Harris.

As Granny Younger tells this part of the story, Smith really captures the aspect of storytelling that allows for embellishment which is so much a part of the Appalachian oral culture. Most of Granny's information about Emmy Harris as a witch is not what Granny has seen with her own eyes, but a creation within her mind of what Almarine and Emmy's first meeting and marriage must have been like. Granny makes the claim that Almarine married Emmy Harris because he was bewitched by her. According to Gabrielle Cliff Hodges in the introduction to *Tales, Tellers, and Texts*, "It is hard for the factual to exist without the imaginative" (3). Granny's explanation, her story, depends on hearsay and imaginative abilities that serve to make factual stories more interesting for listeners.

The final portion of Granny Younger's narrative serves two purposes. The first is to show the first direct interaction between insiders and outsiders to the region when Pricey Jane, Dory's mom and Almarine's second wife, comes into Black Cove with her gypsy uncle and his gypsy band. Almarine immediately falls in love with Pricey Jane (he has banished Emmy Harris from his home because he also begins to believe in the witch tales) and takes her as his wife. The people of the town are concerned about Almarine taking an outsider as his wife. "Squirrel, he is trying to talk Almarine out of it" (Smith

60), and when that doesn't work all the residents of Black Cove run off "to be the first to tell it iffen they can" (Smith 61).

Despite the town's doubts, Pricey Jane is soon loved by all because she entirely assimilates herself into the Appalachian region by abandoning her previous life and accepting her new home and its responsibilities, "Lord, she turned that cabin upside down and sideways cleaning it, she was a-drying apples on the shed roof, she churned butter so light it'd melt in your mouth" (Smith 64). Pricey Jane is entirely satisfied with her new life in Hoot Owl Holler, and she "has never.. .crossed back over that mountain since Almarine brought her here" (Smith 73). Pricey Jane is content with her new, settled life in Hoot Owl Holler, and as an outsider has successfully assimilated into Appalachia. Yet, while she is loved, it is still evident that she is not truly an insider when she and her son die from drinking dew-poisoned milk, an act which a true insider would have known better than to commit. Pricey Jane's assimilation imitates the assimilation of Smith's own mother, which Smith speaks of in an interview with Claudia Lowenstein, "My mother was considered an outsider though she lived there for sixty years. I remember at her funeral another old lady came up and said to me, 'Well, you know, Gig was a mighty nice foreigner'" (488). This statement by Lee Smith, along with her tale of Pricey Jane, leads to the assumption that an outsider can never become an insider in Appalachia.

Pricey Jane's assimilation may in part be possible because she is not "entirely a foreigner" (Smith 63) as Granny Younger puts it. She grew up in a place similar to Black Cove and only joined the gypsy band when her parents died. The only thing truly gypsy about her "was them big gold hoops in her ears" (Smith 64), which will be important as they are passed down through the Cantrell family and become a symbol of dreams. The

symbolism of the earrings begins with Pricey Jane giving them to Dory, her daughter, when she was a little girl. Granny Younger literally brings Dory into the world at the conclusion of her story, and figuratively brings her into the reader's world through her telling of the Cantrell history up to Dory's birth. Granny's last lines are "Name her Dory. Hit means gold" (Smith 68). Dory is the center of *Oral History's* plot, and Granny's narrative has brought her into the realm of readers' understanding after providing her family's history in order to better understand her character. Dory must be provided with a family history in order to create a backdrop for the reader because she is cast as an "other" within her own community, which will be discussed later.

With Jennifer's role in the frame, Smith suggests that there remains one more element of Appalachia to be taken away by outsiders. S. Jones explains

An academic exploitation of the hills which, though different from that of loggers, miners and mill owners who invaded Appalachia earlier in this century, is still abusive. Like these outsiders, Jennifer is out for her own gain, even though unlike most of them she is unaware of her own motives (S. Jones 103).

This exploitation of the region is exemplified when Richard Burlage's written narrative appears in the second section of *Oral History*. Richard is another outsider traveling into Black Cove for his own selfish motives to join "all those pilgrims of yore who have sought, through their travels, a system of belief — who have, at the final destination, found also themselves" (Smith 97): a noble, yet nonetheless egocentric motive for travel. S. Jones explains the similarity between Richard and Jennifer: they both "came to Hoot Owl Holler with ideas of Appalachia that prevented [them] from seeing the place, its people or

[themselves] clearly" (106). Richard believes there has to be more somewhere; there has to be more to life than what he has experienced in Richmond, not unlike those characters living in Black Cove who are searching for more. Ironically in the search to find himself in Hoot Owl Holler, Richard instead leaves more confused about his identity, "I am a sinner, bound for hell; I am a saint, purified by love; I am only a fool....I will come back here and marry her....I shall never marry, I shall become an artist" (Smith 166). His confusion and the events of his narrative are centered on the involvement of Dory in his life; therefore, once again Dory lies at the heart of *Oral History* but never has the chance to tell her own story.

Instead of an oral narrative, Richard's story is presented through his journals in written form. With regard only to form, Smith is setting up differences between the insiders of this region and outsiders. The insiders' stories are meant to be passed on and heard. Richard's story is written in a journal with himself as the only intended audience. Ben Jennings, a critic who focuses on the linguistic aspects of *Oral History*, claims that it is appropriate for Richard's narrative to be written because he is representative of a literate culture, and in his narrative, Smith has captured, "his rationalism; his pretentious, mannered diction; yet also his romantic temperament, his sense of being engaged in a grand romantic adventure" (12). The literate culture that Richard represents is a hindering force. As Eckard notes, "Burlage's immersion in the written tradition of 'father speech,' keeps him from fully experiencing the life and rhythms of the mountains" (123). Corrine Dale in "The Power of Language in Lee Smith's *Oral History*" explores Smith's use of language to create a distinct view of Appalachia, and claims that Richard Burlage explains his experience through the use of metaphors drawn from his University

education. It is only in moments of complete ecstasy that Burlage lets go of the barriers between himself and the mountain culture, and in these moments the words in his journal are replaced with "!!!!!" (Smith 147). The father speech of literate culture limits Burlage's ability to understand and enjoy the mountain culture, and it also puts an aura of distrust around him to both readers and residents of Black Cove.

In the history of the Appalachian region, outsiders have been mistrusted because they often abused the land by causing environmental damage through coal mines or deforestation by the lumber industry. They benefited: the region suffered. Therefore, upon first reading Richard's narrative, it may seem to be unreliable since he is an outsider. However, he is keeping a journal for his own benefit as he searches for answers, and thus, readers can conclude that Richard's narrative may be the most honest account of any of the narratives included in *Oral History*. He does not attempt to conceal any part of his reaction. For instance, when recording his thoughts on one particular girl he sees, Richard writes, "She was hideous" (Smith 112). Yet, he also recognizes that this journey is a learning process for him. For example, he records his reaction to some of his first encounters with the mountain people, "Now Ralph was not the sort of person with whom one would normally entrust one's belongings, any more than the old woman on the train was the sort of woman I am accustomed to dine with. But I confess that I never thought twice - at the time - in either case. (Perhaps my education has already begun)" (Smith 107). The honesty in his remarks leads readers to trust Richard because his reactions acknowledge his own weaknesses or failings as well as those to whom he reacts.

Richard goes into Black Cove to take the position of school teacher. Symbolically this professional position can represent opportunity. He believes in the power of

education and seeks to pass that power on to his students. This quality is admirable in Richard, but his mistake is that he fails to see the stark truth of the lives of those who are insiders to the region; he fails to really share the experience with the residents of Black Cove. Richard records in his diary that

The food there is abominable.. ..No wonder that these people, often handsome and hardy in youth, sicken and die so soon! .. .Despite the Justices' great hospitality .. .I am resolved to obtain a bed-tick and a few other items of convenience and sleep right here in this school room during the school week, largely in order to fend off my own imminent starvation. (Smith 115).

The food includes meager supplies of what was available to Appalachian residents, "a rank oniony collection of mountain greenery collected on the slopes and cooked to death with a piece of pork" (Smith 115). The residents cooked what was available to them in the mountains from their private gardens or the natural environment because of their distance from modern markets such as those available to Richard in Richmond, Virginia. As opposed to Pricey Jane's complete assimilation by acceptance of the culture as her own, Richard protects himself in order to "keep in mind the rather lofty ideals and desires which brought me here" (Smith 115). Richard is unable to truly pass on the opportunities education can bring to his students of Black Cove because his protective distancing has limited his understanding.

The obvious question with Richard's narrative becomes: why is he blocking himself off from this immersion if his purpose for coming to the region was to find something more? This question is not easily answered, and I believe Smith purposefully

makes the answer ambiguous. Richard and Dory's relationship may provide some insight — Dory is, after all, the center of the novel's mystery. Richard and Dory CantrelPs emerging relationship centers on a mutual desire for the unknown. For Richard, Dory had an "otherworldly quality about her" (Smith 118). She represented everything he had never known; she was different than any woman he had ever met. According to Jennings, Richard believes that "Dory is mystically beautiful, open and unaffected, and uninhibited in her sexuality. In contrast to the coquettishness of upper-class women in Richmond" (13). Richard says that when she is "hurt, or worried, she cries. When she's happy, she laughs. When she wants a man, she..." (Ellipsis is Burlage's, Smith 147). For Dory, Richard represented a world beyond the mountain holler where she lived. He represented the possibility of leaving Hoot Owl Holler, which is why she continually asked him to tell her the story about taking her home to Richmond on the train. She loved to hear this story, and even in their last moments together the fantasy notion is what she asked him to tell her.

Rather than use his experience in the Appalachian region to face his own past of a broken engagement and find some sort of healing, "Burlage abandons it [his past] and attempts to tap into memory and experiences that aren't legitimately his, but in fact belong to another people, place and culture" (Eckard 123). Richard attempts to take on a life with Dory. However, he becomes so engrossed in only this one aspect of the Appalachian region, Dory, or the exotic, that he failed to see the reality. His engrossment in Dory as the ultimate experience of Appalachia is symbolized when it is Dory's appearance at the church door that ends Richard's salvation acceptance. He begins attending a local church and feels the urge to accept salvation, but just as he is about to

make that commitment to Jesus, he fails to do so because Dory appears at the church doors and he runs away with her to make love. Frank Soos in the article "Insiders and Outsiders: Point of View in Lee Smith's *Oral History*" questions "whether his [Richard's] obsession is with God or Dory Cantrell" (22). Dory has become his ultimate experience of this region because she is the beautiful, exciting part. Therefore, he allows her to hinder any other insight into the region, making his view of Appalachia as limited as the day he entered the mountain coves.

Another aspect of Richard's failure to truly experience the region lies in the fact that he never genuinely saw himself living there. He could not overcome his outsider mentality that places himself as being somehow positioned above the residents of this Appalachian region, even above Dory by whom he is most intrigued. When Richard reasons out why he should or should not pursue a relationship with Dory, he arrogantly writes, "She is ignorant and largely uneducated; such a gap exists between us that it could never be truly bridged, not even by any attempt on my part to educate her" (Smith 136). He writes this statement even though he has just seen her in her natural environment, the woods, and comments on how well she seems to understand nature.

Richard never learns to appreciate the importance of the knowledge those who live in the region possess. Even though he creates this story to tell Dory about taking her home to his family, he is never able to see Dory physically outside of the region. Richard notes, "I try to imagine taking Dory to a picture show, walking along a sidewalk with her, as we did tonight, yet she seems to exist for me only in that shadowy setting—those three mountain, that closed valley—whence she came" (Smith 148). He is never able to visualize Dory and himself together in his fancy world of Richmond. Therefore, he

ultimately returns to Richmond and leaves Dory behind, pregnant with twins (he is unaware of the pregnancy) in Hoot Owl Holler. Richard, "who had intended to serve Appalachia" (S. Jones 107), has instead come into the land, entered into a relationship with Dory, and left her pregnant with twins; "Appalachia has served him" (S. Jones 107). His abandonment is unintentional; Richard attempts to contact Dory through a letter and asks her to join him, but this letter goes purposefully undelivered by Dory's step-sister Ora Mae in an attempt to protect Dory. The failure of Richard's request to reach Dory illustrates the limitations of written language and life outside of Appalachia (Dale 188). With this episode, Smith shows the importance of oral communication within the Appalachian region, and how patriarchal literate culture can actually be hindering within the region.

Richard's written narrative comments intensely about the attempts of an outsider coming into a new area trying to understand the region. He returns twenty years later, and "makes it [Appalachia] the subject of his art," (S. Jones 107) once again using Appalachia for his own purposes. However, during his second journey to Appalachia, Richard discovers something new. When he returns as a photographer to document the effects of the Great Depression on this region, Richard realizes that he never fully understood the region, nor does he now. For instance, when he goes to photograph Dory's home and sees twin girls playing in the front yard, he fails to realize those children are his daughters. Yet, as he drives off and looks into his rear view mirror that has been shattered by the gunfire of a member of the community, he states "when I looked back at the rolling landscape of Lynchburg around me, it appeared all different... I felt as if I had felt several years ago upon hearing the news that a ninth

planet-Pluto—had been found revolving around the sun, a planet that of course *had been there* all along" (Smith 228-229). Richard realizes that he never really saw the Appalachian region for what it was, even though it had been in his reach to do so. Richard has realized that the Appalachian region is unique in its own right and may never be fully understood by outsiders, but the important thing is to appreciate Appalachia's distinctiveness in all of its aspects.

In the third section of the narrative structure, Sally (Dory's daughter) is the prominent narrator. Sally is a character who has traveled out of the region and married a man whom she refers to as Ding-a-ling. On that marriage, Sally says, "He married me to save me, or so he said, and I married him because I wanted to be saved and make something of myself.. ..Have a respectable life" (Smith 260). However, Sally realizes that the marriage is not one of love and that "I didn't have to be saved anymore" (Smith 261). She needs to save herself and make a life that she loves for herself, so she returns to Black Cove and marries Roy who is perfect for her. Once again, Sally's narrative is mainly concerned with Dory. As Granny Younger's voice sets up the historical background for the Cantrell family, Sally's story shares the outcome of life for the Cantrell family since Dory could not leave with Richard and instead ended up marrying Little Luther Wade.

According to Suzanne Jones, Smith uses Sally's voice to suggest that problems arise from romanticizing a place because it is different. Richard has left Richmond in pursuit of healing from Appalachia, a place very different than his own home. However, Sally's narrative illustrates that the residents of Black Cove are also longing for a different place. "Hoot Owl Holler inhabitants are plagued with romantic notions too. And

their yearnings fix themselves on the flatlands just as the flatlanders' longings often turn toward the mountains" (S. Jones 108). To both insiders and outsiders, a different place becomes the source of what their own home cannot offer them. Sally rejects the view that her family is bewitched and describes the curse as "being eat up with wanting something they haven't got" (Smith 235). The curse began with her grandfather Almarine Cantrell "staring out beyond them hills" (Smith 21) as a young boy, and ended with Pearl (Richard and Dory's daughter and Jennifer's mother) who did her best to "get away, to have a new life" (Smith 270).

In Sally's narrative, the reader learns that Dory took her own life when "She fell - or laid down - on the spur line, and the train cut off her head" (Smith 245). In a chapter dedicated to discussing *Oral History* from Dorothy Combs book, Combs claims that "Dory's death by train is a conflation of the industrial revolution and the ushering in of the age of technology with a continuing fall in the status of women" (73). It is with subtle details such as the railroad that Smith enables readers to form an image of Appalachia through fiction. Dory's death is a result of the exposure to potential opportunities beyond Hoot Owl Holler when Richard came into her life. When the pursuit of those opportunities was blocked by her own family and members of her community, Dory could never recover. Eckard states that "Sally's narrative reveals how Dory was trapped between two worlds. Dory was drawn to the outside world introduced to her by Richard Burlage, and yet she was still firmly rooted in the landscape of the mountains" (124). Sally explains Dory as having "a place inside her [that] was empty [and] we couldn't fill" (Smith 244). This place was her dreams and desires that she never had the chance to pursue.

It is not only Dory's life that is affected by the unfulfilled opportunities Richard brought into her life. Each of Dory's children's lives reflects a different reaction to dreams and opportunities. The oldest of her children Pearl and Maggie, who actually belong to Richard, are very different despite being twins. This difference could be seen even in their eyes.

Pearl was the worst one for wanting of all of us. And the biggest fool. You could see it in her eyes, pretty eyes, blue eyes, exactly the color and shape of Maggie's, but while Maggie's eyes were like a pool and it was restful looking into them, Pearl's eyes were glittery and jumped around they looked wet and kind of smeared (Smith 241).

Pearl, Jennifer's mom, is always searching, has always been searching since the time she began digging ditches to China in the backyard as a child. She always wants more and can never find true happiness, believing that her next accomplishment will bring contentment. Ultimately, Pearl's life ends when she has an extramarital affair with one of her high school art students, and then dies while giving birth to her student's baby, leaving Jennifer and her father behind.

Maggie, Pearl's twin, is completely the opposite. Maggie is so sweet and never has a harsh word to say about anything or anybody. Her life ended in happiness when she married a traveling evangelist and they had four kids, but this was not before her own tribulations. Maggie contracted polio as a child and almost died. Yet, even on her death bed, Maggie was thinking of others when she took off the gold hoops she had inherited upon Dory's death, which come to symbolize the curse of desire in the Cantrell family,

and gave them to Pearl because she knew Pearl was always covetous. Reilly discusses the meaning of the golden hoop earrings,

The earrings are a talisman of the past that aids in its imaginative reconstruction - they inspire narrative history.... They lock the would-be historian in a cycle of questions that push the horizon of a knowable world into the realm of imagination and dream where life is perfect" (82). Maggie placed the well-being of others above her own and she, along with Sally, were the only two characters who succeeded in living a contented life.

Lewis Ray, Dory and Luther Wade's son, completely abandoned his family and the Appalachian region, failing to return even for Pearl's funeral. His actions reflect the coping method of forgetting the past. Billy, their other son, attempted to move away from his mountain family, who embarrass him, by marrying above his own status. He married a doctor's daughter, which would not have been a bad thing, except that his wife and her father never truly accepted him or his family. Billy lived his life trying to impress them, and ultimately failed when his marriage ended with a divorce and his own nervous break down. His motives for marriage, or the pursuing of a different life, were inauthentic and this misfortune surfaces when Pearl's student, Donnie Osbourne, comes to Black Cove and "takes out his father's pistol and shoots him [Billy] point blank in the face" (Smith 275). Sally attempts to explain this odd death, "Now, who knows what Donnie Osbourne thought?... Some said he was jealous, and had got it in mind that the baby was Billy's [despite the fact he was Pearl's brother], not his - and who knows it might have been?" (Smith 275), but comes to the conclusion that "When you get right down to it, who knows? Life is a mystery and that's a fact" (Smith 275). Almarine II, Ora Mae and Luther

Wade's son born after Dory's suicide, has also been caught up in his dreams, but never really tried to pursue them. His biggest leap was joining the Amway business. He is always asking, "Tell me your dreams," but never truly pursuing his own. Almarine's selling of soap with his company was an attempt to become rich but it was not a successful means to fulfilling his own dreams. When Dory failed to feel as if she belonged in her own community, her whole family was affected.

Sally is the one character in the novel who has come full circle in her search for her dreams; her narrative brings the Cantrell family story full circle. According to Eckard, this completion is structurally represented by the equal length of her narrative to the opening narration of Granny Younger. Debbie Wesley, a feminist critic who claims Smith validates female creativity that has traditionally been devalued by patriarchal society, explains that Sally is able to do this because, "Sally refuses to silence the originality of her voice and creates her own life through trial and error" (90). Some mistakes were made along the journey. In her first marriage, when she married Ding-a-ling only to be saved she was fulfilling the expectations of others who told her "You ought to make something of yourself (Smith 255). However, she realized that fulfilling the dreams of others is not enough. Sally met Roy and remarried, fulfilling her own dreams. She and Roy remained in Black Cove, and raised her two kids there.

The relationship Sally shares with Roy is very different than her first marriage. In describing the marriage to Ding-a-ling, Sally says,

all we did was work and come home from work and as I said we never talked. We didn't have much to say, and you'll think that's funny coming

from me, the way I run on, but it's true. I didn't have anything to say and neither did he" (Smith 260).

Sally opens her narrative with the introductory statement, "There's two things I like to do better than anything else in this world.. .and one of them is talk... .You all can guess what the other one is" (Smith 234). Sally emphasizes the importance of oral conversation and merges this with her sexual self. The reason she gives for the happiness brought on by her marriage to Roy is that "Roy has a good time....Roy can fuck your eyes out, Roy can, and talking all the time" (Smith 234). Once again, Smith reiterates the power of oral language by highlighting the fact that Sally and her first husband's inability to talk with each other was a major problem with their marriage, while the conversation she and Roy share is one of the best things about their marriage.

Sally is a powerful woman character with which to end the novel. Dale states "Sally emerges as the most positive voice in the novel... [because she does not] accept limitations on experience" (195). She is able to reconcile her sexual self with the matriarchal oral language, and she is the only character who seems to have realized that you can't escape where you come from; you can't forget about the past. Her final words in the narrative tell her husband, "That's the past. It's nothing to talk about now. Now it's you and me. It's what happens after this" (Smith 278). A person must incorporate his or her past, his or her personal dreams and the expectations that others hold for him or her. The combination is necessary for a fulfilling, integrated life - a life such as Sally's.

Why are the voices of Granny Younger and Sally stronger than the other women? Besides integrating their past and present, the answer lies with their sexuality. Both Granny Younger and Sally are in total control of their sexual decisions. Granny Younger

experienced her sexual fulfillment when she was younger, which she shares with readers in small pieces, "I felt like I knowed him bettern I ever knowed ary a soul. They was a time once when me and Isom - but Lord, that's another story" (Smith 46). In her older years, Granny Younger made the conscious decision to remain single and without children of her own. Instead, she devoted her love and life to the community by becoming the community midwife. Similarly, Sally is also in control of her sexual experience. Sally left a husband, Ding-a-ling, who was sexually unfulfilling; he would "just roll over and go to sleep" (Smith 234). Then she found a man who fulfilled her needs sexually and linguistically. Sally took charge of her sexual experience in order to find a man that could make her happy in every form, Roy. Katherine Kearns, a feminist critic, expounds this idea by stating that "Some kind of self-perceived sexual reconciliation is essential to narrative freedom in Smith's fiction" (185). Women who are in control of their sexuality are the women who share reliable, powerful narratives in *Oral History*.

While Sally and Granny Younger are important voices from powerful women in the narrative structure of this novel, the remaining voices from women are short and somewhat undependable. The other women who share their oral narratives include Rose Hibbits, Mrs. Ludie Davenport, and Ora Mae. Each of these three women has aspects of their lives which lead the reader to question the reliability of their narrative, but at least their voices are heard. The main character, on which everyone's story focuses, Dory, is never given a voice of her own. Why would Smith make these other characters questionable and exclude Dory's voice? Eckard claims that Smith's reason is to use women's voices in order to constitute the force of the "Other" (121). The three weaker

women's narratives illustrate how within their own culture women can be "others," often cast as outsiders by those nearest to them.

After Pricey Jane's death, Rose Hibbits stays with Almarine to help take care of him and Dory. Rose is a person who has never been blessed with good looks, and has therefore felt like an "other" from a very young age. Although she stays with Almarine and does all his chores for him, he never pays her any attention. She is hurt by this and often runs from the cabin crying. Then one day Almarine's brother's wife, Vashti, appears on the cabin porch after her husband has been killed. She takes over the household chores, and eventually takes over as Almarine's wife and also bears him another son, Isadore. Rose is sent away and feels even more like an "other" than she ever has.

Upon leaving the Cantrell household, Rose spread the story that Hoot Owl Holler is cursed and Almarine asked her to stay but she would not because it was cursed. Rose explains the curse by saying, "Hit's a curse on the whole holler and I ain't having any part of it. Almarine has done tole me hisself. That witch she put it on" (Smith 87). Her actions are important for the plot because it sets up the "curse" that will continue to haunt and destroy the Cantrell family, a curse that is truly a longing for what is not obtainable. With Rose's story, we see the account of a woman who feels like an outsider within her own community and how this causes her to react irrationally in certain situations. However, in other parts of the narrative, it is revealed that Rose is sick, or "touched" as the Appalachia residents call it. In Jink CantrelPs narrative, Dory's younger brother, he gives the reader an example of Rose's behavior, "Rose Hibbits started talking out loud to herself then, the wildest stuff you ever heard.. ..'It was a phone call from hell,' said Old

Rose" (Smith 199). The madness makes the reader question Rose's narrative authority despite the desire to believe in the curse.

Rose's story also highlights how opinions about the Appalachian region have been formed. Often times when individuals come upon a place or thing that they do not like, or in the case of Appalachia, do not understand, stories are created that make sense of the place to them. The stories may be partially true but also have fictionalized aspects, like Rose Hibbits' story of the Cantrell curse. However, despite the questionable truthfulness of the story it will remain as part of the overall explanation of the place, just as the Cantrell curse is never forgotten by the characters in *Oral History*.

Mrs. Ludie Davenport's story is that of Almarine's ghost dog chasing her through the woods. Upon first reading, this story seems to serve no significant purpose in the novel. However, with closer examination the purposes of Mrs. Davenport's narrative become clear. The first is to reiterate the permeation of folklore and legend in every aspect of the Appalachian region's insiders' lives. The second is to show readers that to truly understand a story or a place one must recognize the absurd, the bad and the good, with Ludie's account representing the absurd.

Yet, readers also question Ludie Davenport's narrative because of the way her family treats her when she shares her story with them. Within her own family, Mrs. Davenport is seen as an "other" because of her strange ghost tales. They do not believe her, but reluctantly allow her to rest up at their house for one night before she crosses back over the mountain through the woods. However, they make it clear that "You [Mrs. Davenport] can't stay but a day now" (Smith 178). Mrs. Davenport's daughter-in-law describes her as, "She just wants me to wait on her hand and foot" (Smith 177), and her

son tries to explain to his wife that there is nothing he can do with her. When Ludie Davenport's only family question her reliability, the reader ultimately does the same unintentionally casting Mrs. Davenport as an "other" also.

The only remaining narrative shared by a woman is Ora Mae's tale. Ora Mae is the one character in the novel who doesn't allow herself to dream. This is not to say that she does not have dreams because it becomes clear that she does when she regrets not marrying Parrot Blankenship, instead staying behind to take care of the Cantrell family in Hoot Owl Holler. On refusing his marriage proposal, Ora Mae says, "I kept on crying because it was like I seen the mountains all around me open up there for a minute, and I seen Charleston, and me over there with him and all dressed up" (Smith 215). However, Ora Mae keeps these dreams hidden so deep within that it is often hard for even her to see them. As the other voices tell their stories, an image of Ora Mae is created as a hard character who always takes over in any situation. This image makes the reader question why Ora Mae acts so distant from everyone else.

It is not until we hear Ora Mae's oral narrative that we can see Ora Mae has created this character for herself so that she can block out dreams that she sees no way of accomplishing. Ora Mae is an outsider who comes into the region not by her own choice, and even when she and her mother are accepted into an Appalachian family, Ora Mae will not let go of her outsider status. She distances herself by consuming the details of the family management. Her narrative opens with "I wisht I didn't know what-all I know, nor have to do what all I have to" (Smith 208). She has claimed it as her personal responsibility to take care of the Cantrell family because she is the oldest of all the children in Vashti and Almarine's family. Ora Mae explains "I've got my hands full of

Cantrells who can't do a thing without me" (Smith 215). This is a duty that she never relinquishes even after all of the children, including herself, have grown up and married creating their own families.

Ora Mae also reveals that she feels trapped by the mountains, "the farther I come, the more I felt these mountains closing in and by the time I got up to the house it was like they had closed up in a circle around me" (Smith 208). Ora Mae was brought to the mountains as a young child when her mother, Vashti (who is of Indian lineage, making Vashti and Ora Mae visibly different from the others), came and married Almarine after Pricey Jane's death. After Ora Mae's arrival, she blocked her hopes and dreams from her mind and replaced them with household chores and duties. Ora Mae's constructed bleakness led her to resent Dory because Dory was so full of dreams. The last image of Ora Mae (in Sally's narrative) is of her standing on a cliff's edge holding Dory's gold earrings, which have come to symbolize desire, to her own ears before she wails and throws them into the darkness. Reilly discusses the meaning of this act, "The woman who made her life a study in plainness and sacrifice has all the while been repressing a dream she could hardly bear to face, the same dream of romance that most of these mountain people live by" (86). Ora Mae wanted what she would not allow herself to do; she wanted to be able to dream, but she stopped herself to avoid risk and avoid pain. Readers question Ora Mae because of her chosen refusal of a heartfelt assimilation. Ora Mae assimilates into Appalachia in the Cantrell family but maintains the attitude of an outsider, feeling like she is the only one who can take care of the Cantrell family, and that without her the family would be lost. Thus by choice or by rejection, women may be "others" - though they are a part of the culture, they are apart.

Unlike Granny Younger and Sally, the other women narrators lack individual control of their sexuality. Rose Hibbits is so caught up in her need for sexual satisfaction that she ignores the needs of others, and her overwhelming desires drive her to madness. Winsbro suggests that Rose is too "focused on her desire for love, her need for sexual satisfaction, and her expectation of rejection that she is unable to allow for that grief (42). Rose allows her fear of rejection and need of sexual fulfillment to overtake all other aspects of her life. She is allowing others to define her experience. Likewise, Mrs. Ludie Davenport, although married, often flees from her husband by escaping to her son and daughter-in-law's home. Ora Mae also lacks control of her sexual experience. It is clear that she desired to leave Hoot Owl Holler with Parrot Blankenship, but she remained in the cove because she believed the Cantrells could not survive without her. However, the Cantrells are also serving an important purpose in her life. They allow her to avoid taking risks. Reilly explains Ora Mae's character: "Ora Mae knows that when people dream beyond the physical constraints of their world, though they may find temporary bliss, they are ultimately thwarted by nature, by the condition of being human, fallible, mortal⁹ (86). This responsibility gave Ora Mae the means necessary to avoid the risk of loving Parrot and experiencing heartbreak when the relationship did not work.

With the many narratives that surround Dory's life, the reader is never allowed to hear Dory share her own version of her life. From other narrators, the reader learns of Dory's death, birth, relationships, babies, and behavior. Yet, there is one very important part of Dory's life that is not revealed: Dory's dreams. Based on the other narratives, mainly Sally's, it is evident that Dory longed for something more, just as all the characters. It is assumed that what Dory desires is the life Richard promised her in

Richmond but failed to provide. However, the truth of Dory's dreams, desires and longings cannot be determined without doubt because she never tells her own story. Buchanan explains "Smith varies the narrative voices in order to produce several good attempts to get at the center of the Cantrell family past. But because each teller is telling about his or her own perception of or need from Dory, Dory herself remains elusive" (338). Therefore, despite all the information about Dory that is shared, her true character is never known because the reader is denied access to her innermost dreams and desires.

Robert Stephens classifies *Oral History* as a Southern family saga, and says that, "She [Smith] wrote *Oral History* to explore 'how you can never know the truth, if it exists at all' because 'you never know what really happened'; all you know is 'what people thought about it'" (188). This statement also specifically applies to Dory; we only know what other characters think about Dory. Even in Sally's narrative which shares the end of Dory's life she says, "Whatever she was doing it was like Mama was *waiting* somehow, caught up in a waiting dream.... A lot of times, it was like she was listening to something none of the rest of us hear" (Smith 239). Never hearing Dory's voice in the novel reinforces the reader's impression of her as an isolated character, separate from her community.

The only definite conclusion that can be drawn about Dory's character is that she felt trapped. This can be established because of the facts that Sally shares about Dory's death. Dory leaves the canning of tomatoes and kills herself by laying down on the train tracks, the train tracks by which Richard left Black Cove. The train tracks represented a world beyond Appalachia. The exploitation of new possibilities confused Dory's harmony with Appalachian culture and its patriarchal expectations, and as Eckard claims,

"ultimately cast her into the unique position of being an Other in both Burlage's world and her own" (124). Dory could not escape Hoot Owl Holler, but she was also no longer accepted within her own community. The community talked vulgarly about Dory, who had once been the most sought after bachelorette in all Hoot Owl Holler, after Richard left. In Jink Cantrell's narrative he complains that, "I hate it when folks start up all that stuff about Dory" (Smith 199), referring to a comment made earlier: "She [Red Emmy] says Dory's the one she has loved all along, and she claims her for sure, and she don't give a damn for a man" (Smith 199). Little Luther Wade was the only man who could marry her after she had been "damaged" by her sexual relationship with Richard Burlage, and he is only able to do this because he is cripple, which makes him a "half-man" according to Sally and in the eyes of Appalachian expectations where men must be able to perform physical labor in order to support their families. Dory's relationship with Richard, occurring because of a longing for the unknown, left her unsatisfied and estranged from the only world she did know - Hoot Owl Holler.

Ultimately, using the words of Buchanan, "Dory is helpless and unable to break out of the bonds of family and place to try to be what she wants" (343), even when that family and place have "othered" her. Therefore, she also is failing to control her sexual experiences. Although, Richard writes of Dory's take-control nature during their first sexual encounter,

Suck me,' she said, and took my head and drew me to her breast, offering it up with her hand, and by now I was near delirium. While I sucked at her nipple she took my other hand and guided it up her thigh beneath her skirt

and inside her panties until I could feel her wet warmth. She pushed my fingers inside; she began to move her hips (Smith 146),

Dory does not maintain this controlling nature throughout their relationship. In the initial stages of Richard and Dory's relationship, Dory is in control, but when the time comes for Dory to really pursue her desires - the longing for more - Dory remains grounded in a community that no longer accepts her. Those around her, and those reading *Oral History*, do not fully understand Dory's motivations and desires, but they do realize that Dory is caught between two cultures.

Lee Smith is an Appalachian writer who is able to reach out to a universal audience. Buchanan says, "Lee Smith's settings are Southern, her interest in and ability for storytelling are Southern, but her characters and stories, because of their realism, even ordinariness, are universal" (324). The variety of insider/outsider, women/men characters within *Oral History* are used to explore the timeless question every individual has asked themselves, "Do I belong? Who belongs?" The Appalachian region has traditionally been recognized as an area that seems unreceptive to outsiders (Williams). This attitude is reflected through the experiences of Jennifer and Richard in *Oral History*. Richard writes, "For I am what they call a 'foreigner.' As they use it, this term does not necessarily refer to someone from another country, or even from another state, but simply to *anybody* who was not born in this area of the county" (Smith 125). However, Smith's work also demonstrates the idea that individuals can be classified as "others" within their own communities.

Specifically, Smith shows how women within Appalachia who fail to take control of their own lives become alienated. When women attempt to fulfill specific social

expectations regardless of their own needs and desires, they will either feel like outsiders or be viewed as outsiders. It is then that women truly feel the need to escape the constraints under which their culture is placing them. However, breaking away from the culture does not necessarily bring happiness. When women are unable to integrate their past, present and future within their culture, they may become strangers within their own land. Through Smith's narrative structure with multiple narrators including a combination of insider and outsider narratives, she emphasizes the power of women to belong by controlling their experiences without forgetting about the place from which they come.

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