

**Understanding Appalachian Stereotypes in  
Lee Smith's *Oral History***

Senior Paper

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A widely accepted belief in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to

Katie Algeo, was that “Appalachia was a place apart, a different and sometimes dangerous place, a place whose people possessed only the mere rudiments of civilization” (28). Algeo’s article “Locals on Local Color: Imagining Identity in Appalachia” documents that this image was based on little evidence and was created by short-story authors, novelists, missionaries, social workers, handicraft organizers, and academics who lacked an accurate understanding of the region (28). Local-color writers, a popular genre in the nineteenth century, greatly contributed to the creation of Appalachian stereotypes because their stories were believed to “convey the essence of that locale through detailed depictions of the geographic setting and through characters that supposedly represent essential qualities of the place” (Algeo 30). These simple, romantic plots of local-color stories contained characters with exaggerated regional traits that promoted stereotyping (Algeo 30). According to Ronald Lewis in “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity,” the first documented local-color travelogue, written in 1877 by Will Wallace Harney, was titled “A Strange Land and Peculiar People” and emphasized Appalachia’s physical and cultural isolation (Lewis 21).

Another famous article titled “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” written by William Goodell Frost (1899), “signified the maturity of the concept of Appalachia as a spatially and culturally remote remnant of a bygone day” (Lewis 21). Frost blames the physical isolation of the region for the outdated culture of the mountain people, stating that: “This is the excuse for their Rip Van Winkle sleep. They have been beleaguered by nature [...] as a place for human habitation the entire region has one characteristic — the lack of natural means of communication. Its highways are the beds of streams; commerce and intercourse are conditioned by horseflesh and saddle-bags” (2). Many local-color stories were published in popular national magazines such *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly* (Algeo 30). Their well-intentioned but

uninformed accounts helped establish a biased view of Appalachian culture and influenced America's perception. Mountain people became known as ignorant, isolated, passive, static, backwards, poor, incestuous, lawless, and uneducated population. Contemporary writers, setting their fiction in this disparaged region, have created a revisionist view of Appalachia through stories of real culture and people – not the exaggerated tales of the nineteenth century.

One such author is Lee Smith, born in Grundy, Virginia 1944; Smith continues a long distinguished career of fiction writing with a focus on Appalachian culture and regional women. She has written numerous short stories and eight novels, including *Oral History* (1983), *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), *Saving Grace* (1995), and *On Agate Hill* (2006). Smith's novels create a reality through intricate details of her characters' lives in the southern mountain communities of Appalachia to refute the popular stereotypes of the region. Reinhold L. Hill, in his article "These stories are not 'real,' but they are as true as I can make them," argues that Lee Smith's "ethnographic representations of Appalachian culture, as depicted in her fiction, are better representations of culture than standard academic ethnographies because they show the culture rather than merely writing it" (106). Smith invites the reader to move from an outsider perspective to an insider one that counters the long-standing stereotypes of ignorant, incestuous, and isolated peoples hiding out in the mountains. Ivy Rowe, the heroine of Smith's novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Florida Grace Shepherd of *Saving Grace*, and Molly Petree in *On Agate Hill* represent how women from rural and primarily poor regions moved beyond their traditional female roles. They are strong, independent and intelligent, regardless of their informal education and lack of exposure to other regions.

In her early novel *Oral History*, Smith establishes a focus on Appalachian culture, overturning the conventional notions of mountain people. *Oral History's* plot revolves around a

young woman named Jennifer, who traveled up to the mountains from the city, to hear the stories of her kin. Ironically, Jennifer never gained any true insight or understanding from her interaction with her family because she is like most Americans, who for a hundred years have not moved beyond the cartoon images of Appalachians. *Oral History* is a compelling illustration of Smith's depiction of the beauty, culture, and significance of people in Appalachia. Smith uses these aspects to provide an alternate perspective of mountain life. She also employs Jennifer Bingham's character, as well as Richard Burlage, a traveling teacher, to reflect the mindset and observations of early local-color writers.

The derogatory stereotypes that Jennifer and Richard bring with them are unfounded because they are based entirely on the writings of outside, unreliable sources. According to Dwight Billings' book *Backtalk from Appalachia*, Jennifer and Richard's image of mountain people coincides with the local-color writers who came before them because "the persistent belief in Appalachian distinctiveness thus results from a persistent way of writing about the mountain region rather than from the regions' actual past" (12). Billings' claims that these stereotypes of an isolated and static culture are groundless because "If we examine the region's economic evolution from the perspective of rural nineteenth-century America [...] it is clear that much of Appalachia was neither unusually isolated, physically or culturally, nor was its population uniformly more homogeneous than that of other sections of rural America" (22). There is historical evidence that directly contradicts the descriptions given to the world by the traveling writers who claimed to capture the essence of Appalachia. In actuality, Algeo writes that "portions of Appalachia were well traveled, especially where mountain passes facilitated the trade routes that connected trans-Appalachian Kentucky and Tennessee with the East and South, bringing people, goods, and ideas through the mountains" (34).

Regardless of their validity, the false stereotypes of Appalachia continue to appear in modern, mainstream culture and media. Billing's states that in the late 1900's, the region faced a new cycle of stereotyping due to "an era of global economic restructuring that brought insecurity, declining living standards, and cutbacks in benefits and protections to millions of Americans [...] mountain people, it seems, were acceptable targets for hostility, projection, disparagement, scapegoating, and contempt" (3). Because of the supposed "behind-the-times" culture, originally deemed picturesque, the region became a "measure of how far America still had to go, in terms of economic growth and sophistication (Jones 101). In the eyes of the general public, the quaint and simple mountain people were transformed into an obstacle that served to halt American progress.

According to Anthony Harkins in his book *Hillbilly*, the term hillbilly was coined in the early 1900's portraying Southern mountain people as ignorant and primitive, while also being "one of the most lasting and pervasive images in American popular iconography" (3). The entire Appalachian population was classified under this derogatory term that represents people who "challenge the dominant trends of twentieth-century American life—urbanization, the growing centrality of technology, and the resulting routinization of American life" (Harkins 4). The upper and middle-classes commonly considered hillbillies to be poor, working-class, white Southerners. Anthony Harkins writes that the cultural traits generally associated with the Appalachian hillbilly culture include "a diet rooted in scarcity [...] physical appearance and clothing that denoted hard and specifically working-class laboring conditions [...] an animal-like existence on the economic and physical fringes of society, ignorance and racism, and in all cases, economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment" (5). Examples of common stock characters portrayed in modern media, which have not changed over the centuries, are the shiftless hunter,

Granny smoking a corncob pipe, and the ever-present mountain man:

The lanky, gun-toting, grizzle-bearded man with a jug of moonshine in one hand and a coon dog at his feet, the archetypal patriarch of the mountains. Other familiar characters include the sallow matriarch, corncob pipe planted firmly between her lips; a genial and gangling youth, physically powerful but intellectually naive; and a buxom and almost equally dim female counterpart. (Algeo 30)

These characters appear in all types of media and literature. The popular show “The Beverly Hillbillies,” which aired in 1962, depicted a rural hillbilly family humorously attempting to live in urban California. Jed Clampett, the overall clad father who has little formal education, fits the depiction of a mountain patriarchal figure. All the other characters adhere to the original stereotypes from the 1800’s, including their backwards traditions and inability to assimilate into modern culture due to their outdated lifestyle.

It is apparent that these derogatory stereotypes of the past continue to haunt Appalachia, regardless of the fact that they have largely been proven inaccurate. Lee Smith attempts to counter these common, undeserved, and damaging images and stereotypes associated with Appalachia in her fiction. She is particularly successful in doing so in her 1982 novel *Oral History*. Smith provides the reader with a detailed and personal account of a mountain family’s history, juxtaposing it with the limited view of outsiders. Smith takes the reader on a journey into the lives of her characters to reveal the depth and richness of Appalachian life.

*Oral History* is written from multiple viewpoints and voices, each contributing to different layers of the story. Paula Eckard’s article “The Prismatic Past in *Oral History* and *Mama Day*” explains Smith’s reasons for using multiple voices, “through the narratives of different characters, the rich Appalachian past of the novel is conveyed in the recitation of

stories, folklore, and legends as they pertain to Hoot Owl Holler and the Cantrell family” (121). Suzanne Jones, in her article “City Folks in Hoot Owl Holler: Narrative Strategy in Lee Smith’s *Oral History*,” argues that Smith’s use of different perspectives “indicates that she is just as interested in the varying perceptions of Appalachia as she is in the actual place and its people” (102). The fact that the narrative is derived from different people’s personal accounts establishes creditability and believability, as well as providing multiple perspectives of the same situations. According to Frank Soos, in “Insiders and Outsiders: Point of View in Lee Smith’s *Oral History*,” our challenge as a reader is to “take on the question of a seemingly outrageous belief in a sometimes magic but always mystical world in the face of our own deeply rooted faith in the logic and rationality of our own systems of truth” (21). The personal stories draw the reader into the private lives of Smith’s characters and give a realistic and comprehensive view of their reality, therefore the reader can decide for themselves if these stereotypes are an accurate portrayal of Appalachian life.

The novel presents an inside and outside perspective of mountain life to provide a deeper understanding of Appalachian culture, in addition to revealing how cultural misconceptions are created and reinforced in our society. Jones’ article “City Folks,” states that Smith uses “the perspectives of two outsiders, upper-class Richard Burlage from Richmond, and middle-class Jennifer Bingham from Abington, to examine the causes and consequences of typical twentieth-century perceptions of Appalachia” (102). Ben Jennings, in his article “Language and Reality in Lee Smith’s *Oral History*,” also comments on Smith’s use of juxtaposing perspectives, believing that the “languages of the various characters provide much of the richness and originality of *Oral History*” (10). Smith gives her characters distinct dialects and grammar to reflect the environment from which they came.

Smith constructs *Oral History* as a frame story, separated into four books with a prologue and epilogue. “Language And Reality,” written by Jennings, explains the function of the frame story, “within this frame, various life stories are told, as if to say, if the past could speak, these voices would reveal the truths about Jennifer’s family history. Each one overlaps with the preceding one, providing for a continuous narrative” (10). The prologue, in italics, begins in present time with a third-person omniscient narrator who introduces several characters and the setting. Frank Soos believes the aim of Smith’s narrator is “to quickly establish the values of the world, in this case contemporary Appalachia, that her characters inhabit [...] Our narrator is in omniscient form to let us know that what’s going on in Hoot Owl Holler is just fine, thank you” (Soos 20). The reader is forced to recognize the good aspects of Appalachia that have remained largely undocumented.

The catalyst of the story begins with Jennifer, an estranged relative of the Cantrell family, who is collecting information for a project on oral history. She questions her remaining relatives in Hoot Owl Holler to obtain stories regarding her ancestry. Jennifer does not gain any significant insight on her ancestry because, according to Jones, “her preconceptions alter her perception. She sees in the mountain people exactly what her professor has encouraged her to see, and she collects information that she knows will impress him” (103). Jennifer is unable to hear the stories of her family’s ancestry because she only sees what she chooses to see, not the truth of her past.

The prologue guides the reader into the modern day lives of the Cantrell family who still reside in Hoot Owl Holler. Lee Smith plays on the readers’ expectations of Appalachian isolation and simplicity by “making sure that for every cotton quilt there is an aluminum lawn chair and for every log cabin here is a custom painted van” (Jones, 102). Smith reveals to the reader that

20<sup>th</sup> century Appalachia is similar to American culture found anywhere else in the country. Although Appalachia does have its distinct traditions, the region should not be considered backwards or static. Little Luther, Jennifer's grandfather, is described as sitting on the porch swing wearing his "new suspenders," "cowboy boots" and "Western shirt with flowers on it" (Smith, 13). Luther's son Al and daughter-in-law Debra have a "living room suite, which is Mediterranean" and "they do AmWay full time" (Smith, 15). Debra wears "pink knit slacks, tight, and a black T-shirt with "Foxy Lady" written on it in silver glitter [...] her long yellow hair like a movie star" (Smith, 14). The two grandsons love to watch *Magnum* on television and the granddaughter Suzy has a *Charlie's Angel* doll and silver fingernails. Smith plays on the hillbilly, white trash stereotype in the description of her mountain characters' clothing and actions, but she will move beyond their superficial appearances and into the lives of her characters.

Jennifer's observations of Appalachia and her extended family are not revealed until after the narrator has described her family members. Due to the character description above, the reader then knows that this family is not behind the times because they appear to be assimilated into mainstream culture. When Jennifer's thoughts are revealed, her misconceptions of mountain quaintness are clear: "Jennifer thinks it is just beautiful in this holler, so peaceful, like being in a time machine [...] it is so plainly wonderful [...] And these people are so sweet, so simple, so kind [...] they are not backward at all" (Smith 16). Suzanne Jones observes that Jennifer is similar to amateur folklorists because she "tries to prove that a pastoral past still lives in the present" (102). Her descriptions of the picturesque and timeless mountains are similar to the writings of local-colorists a century before, condescending sentimental depictions of people in a far away land.

Jennifer first learns of her Appalachian family from her parents, “all her life, she looked down on her real mother’s family, the way she was taught by her father and her step mother” (Smith 16). Stereotyping is not inherent; it is something that is learned. Lee Smith drives this truth by making several statements similar to the one above. Jennifer overheard her stepmother, Martha, telling her friends “how backward his first wife’s people were and how of course they’ve lost contact with them now [...] her parent’s have moved out of their house because it was haunted. Haunted! In this day and age!” (Smith 17). The family members in Hoot Owl Holler are looked down upon because they still believe in ghosts. What Martha does not know is the story behind the ghost, which may have made her less quick to judge. Only those living within the culture appreciate the supernatural because it helps explain why certain events happen. Jennifer, just as her stepmother, is unable to realize and accept this cultural difference.

The true reason for Jennifer’s trip to Hoot Owl Holler was to impress Dr. Ripman, her college professor. She never would have visited her family had it not been for his interest and encouragement. In fact, she was embarrassed “because she was even so slightly related to people like that” (Smith 17). Jennifer records her ‘impressions’ of the mountains in a journal that she will hand in to be graded. It is apparent in her writing that she does not accurately record her experience but rather what she believes Dr. Ripman will want to hear because it is filled with “romantic notions and clichéd rhetoric, consciously chosen to please her folklore professor” (Jones 103).

Jennifer explains that the “true benefits of this trip may derive not from what is recorded or not recorded by the tape now spinning in that empty room above me, but from my new knowledge of my heritage and my new appreciation of these colorful, interesting folk. My *roots*” (Smith 19). In actuality, Jennifer gains no new understanding whatsoever of her family because

she is incapable of looking past these stereotypes of ‘colorful, interesting folk.’ It was her teacher who wanted her to “expand [her] consciousness, tolerance and depth” which would in turn, lead her to “new frontiers of self-knowledge” (Smith 19). It is evident that Jennifer is not actually interested in or capable of understanding her family history because she continues to see herself as superior due to her civilized upbringing. Rather than try to truly connect with her family, she simply observes them. Jennifer sees her grandfather “like a tiny little doll in the front-porch swing” (Smith 17). The closing statement of her ‘impressions’ is “I shall descend now, to be with them as they go about their evening chores” (Smith 20). The use of the word ‘descend’ reveals that she still considers her social status to be above her family members. When she reaches her uncle’s house, ‘nobody is doing any chores. Everything from dinner has been put away. Even the smell of fried chicken has disappeared” (Smith 20). This event counteracts Jennifer’s presumptions and reveals to the reader that she is oblivious to what is actually going on in the lives of the Cantrell family. Her impressions are inaccurate and heavily influenced by her poorly informed notions of Appalachian culture. Jennifer adheres to the common stereotypes of Appalachia in her writing because this is what she expects life in Hoot Owl Holler to reflect; yet her actual encounter is quite different from what is documented. She attempts to mold her Appalachian family into what she believes they should be, simply omitting what does not fit.

It is interesting to note what Jennifer does choose to exclude from her ‘impressions.’ Suzanne Jones observes, “though startled at the sight of little Suzy Q’s silver phosphorescent fingernails, Jennifer does not take notes on this phenomenon” (Jones 103). Uncle Al’s van “with its ornate custom painting job – maroon palm trees, golden waves, a black death’s head on the back” (Smith 20) also goes unmentioned. Yet, when she hears her grandfather snoring, Jennifer writes that it resembles the “wind blowing through a tree full of autumn’s dead leaves” (Smith

21). Jones' states that Jennifer does this because "her grandfather with his dulcimer and folk songs, he is the sort of person one would expect to find in Hoot Owl Holler" (Jones 103).

Jennifer's ignorance is multiplied when she says to Ora Mae "I think it is just wonderful the way all of you still live right here in this valley and help each other out. It's remarkable. Not many people live that way any more" (Smith 21). She plans to write something about "extended family" in her notebook. Jennifer has no idea that mountain life is not always easy or 'wonderful,' because she has lived in a world of wealth and comfort her entire life. Smith drives this point home when Al and Little Luther begin singing "Wildwood Flower" with Debra clogging in her sandals. For Jennifer, "it is all so fine, it is just like [she] hoped it would be" (Smith 23); laughter and dancing was exactly how she imagined their simple, happy lives would be.

The epilogue, like the prologue in italics, shifts back to the third person omniscient narrator. It informs the reader that Jennifer's uncle Al does not appreciate her intrusion on their lives and her obviously condescending attitude towards them. After returning the recorder left in the haunted house, Al warns Jennifer to "take it and go on, and 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). Her uncle is referring to the truth of her family's history that Jennifer has been protected from by her father. Jennifer responds by saying "I don't understand what's going on here" (Smith 283). Her inability to understand originates from her failure to recognize her ignorance and naivety. Her polite manners do not cover up "the fact that she has related to relatives in terms of how well they fit her assignment" (Jones 106). Before Jennifer leaves Hoot Owl Holler, Smith surprises the reader by having Al kiss Jennifer, "Al grabs her right off her feet and kisses her so hard that stars smash in front of her eyes. Al sticks his tongue

inside her mouth” (Smith 284). Jennifer is extremely shaken up from this incident but sorts it all out by choosing to believe that “Al is nothing but a big bully, a joker, after all. They still live so close to the land, all of them. Some things seem modern, like the van, but they’re not really. They are really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts – it’s the other side of the pastoral coin” (Smith 284).

Suzanne Jones, in “City Folk in Hoot Owl Holler,” states that the incestuous kiss symbolizes the idea that lines are not clearly drawn in *Oral History*, for “just as soon as Smith aligns her readers with the mountain folk against the city folk, she changes our perspective, refusing to allow us to romanticize the mountain people, and makes us see that these expressive folk could benefit from a little civilized restraint” (Jones 111). Al kissed Jennifer to counteract her beliefs that they were happy, innocent people living simple, isolated lives. Jennifer convinces herself that the kiss was meant to be a joke, acceptable because of his ‘primitive’ upbringing. Nothing that she encountered on her visit made her deviate from her original notions of Appalachia and because she does not allow “the people there to be themselves, she cannot experience either self-discovery or true communication with the Appalachians” (Jones 110).

Lee Smith encourages her readers to step beyond the cultural boundary that Jennifer was unable to pass. She does this by giving the reader the stories of the Cantrell family, the oral history and mountain voices that “provide a corrective to Jennifer’s romantic notions for the reader if not for her” (Jones 104). We the reader, hear several versions of the same story from different voices to “show us that the repeated transmission of the tale supports the belief and produces a legend that may make its way into family history” (Jones 106). These tales and beliefs are the frame of the Cantrell family and Appalachian culture. Jennifer is incapable of hearing these stories due to her biases. Beginning with the voice of Granny Younger in book one,

four generations of the long and intricate history of the Cantrell family is revealed, beginning in the early 1900's. According to Ben Jennings, Smith captures in the voice of Granny "the imaginative diction and metaphorical playfulness, as well as the paratactic style of the vernacular in oral history" as well as "recreating an authentic nineteenth-century Appalachian dialect" (12). Granny Younger promises the reader to "tell you a story that's truer than true, and nothing so true is so pretty. It's blood on the moon, as I say. The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffen you mislike it, you don't have to hear" (Smith 37). Granny warns the reader that the truth is not always the story one prefers to hear and also that her perspective is also biased. According to Frank Soos, "Lee Smith has Granny serve up plenty of folk wisdom, old remedies, tall tales, straight historical accuracies about the way people lived in turn-of-the-century Appalachia" (Soos 20). She will not spare us the harsh details that Jennifer was sheltered from, so that we can gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of their culture, while also incorporating centuries old stereotypes: "the life that Granny Younger describes is the hard struggle for survival of the subsistence farmers, who, of necessity, had to live close to the land. The community of Hoot Owl Holler as depicted here seems to be pre-literate, several miles by wagon trace from the closest crossroads store, a day's journey from Black Rock, the county seat where the nearest school is" (Jennings 11).

We hear stories of Van Cantrell's leg that "started up oozing a clear liquid where it had been cut off and healed over" and how once it killed him they "had to burn sulfur in there for two weeks to get the smell outen the cabin" (Smith 30). Granny used spider webs, soot, and lard to try and heal Van's oozing leg instead of conventional medicine (Smith 30). However, this did not work because it was meant to stop bleeding, not oozing, so she tried "what my mamma showed me," repeating Ezekiel 16, verse six (Smith 30). Granny reveals community rituals and

folk remedies for different ailments, none of which include Westernized medicine, yet they worked just fine for them. The reader is given a description of a birth ceremony:

Here's what they do—you ring your bell [...] and all the womenfolks and gals comes from all over carrying food [...] They'll eat, they'll drink [...] they'll dust the baby with dust [...] for luck, and then they'll take an ax outen under the bed where you put it to cut the pain [...] and chop up the man's hat iffen they can find it [...] then they'll take and bury the borning quilt and then they'll go on home. (Smith 67)

Smith includes the details of mountain traditions so that the reader can experience their true culture and understand their belief systems. Their culture may be different from the majority of America but that does not make them backwards or static. Jennings states that “The world Granny Younger describes is one in which the rhythms of life are in harmony with the seasonal cycles. She articulates a folk aesthetic, an intuitive appreciation of the natural world” (11). Smith uses Granny as a tool to show this alternate way of life, one that is rich with tradition and in tune with the environment.

Richard Burlage's character, first introduced in book two, serves to do the opposite, offering “us outsiders a chance to see what would happen to a test case, an outsider plunging into Granny's world” (Soos, 21). He represents, as does Jennifer, the inability and lack of motivation to understand Appalachia due to preconceived stereotypes of the region. For Jones in “City Folks,” Richard “provides a striking contrast to the expressive and colorfully distinctive mountain voices that precede his in the narrative” (107). Richard, a schoolteacher from Richmond, Virginia, travels to Appalachia with the hopes of educating and modernizing the population, like so many others before him. He claims his goal is to get to the root of consciousness and belief, which is actually the goal of the novel itself:

I intend for this journal to be a valid record of what I regard as essentially a pilgrimage, a simple geographical pilgrimage, yes, but also a pilgrimage back through time, a pilgrimage to a simpler era, back—dare I hope it—to the very roots of consciousness and belief. I make this pilgrimage fully aware of the august company I hereby 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. I seek no less, *I seek no less*. (Smith 97)

Richard views Appalachia as an exotic and pastoral place due to its geographical location. He believes he has two lenses through which to view the world, one based on Appalachia and the other on the rest of the country, “I had before me two object lessons, I thought: two ways to face the world. One way as embodied by this woman—simple, unassuming, a kind of peasant dignity, a naturalness inherent in her every move. The other [...] smartness, sophistication, veneer without substance” (Smith 102). Soos believes that Richard’s notions of Appalachia are comparative to “a clumsy anthropologist, harmless but too obsessed with being in the presence of real natives to actually see anything clearly” (21). Yet, according to numerous historians discussed early in the paper, it is evident that Richard’s notions are not harmless; indeed they have an adverse effect on the portrayal of stereotypes of the region.

Jennings believes that “Burlage’s journal is like a local-color story written about the mountains. He tried to be open-minded and objective in dealing with the inhabitants of Hoot Owl Holler and their culture, but he is ultimately bound by his class prejudices and is forever astonished that “this mountain region [is] as stranger land than Richmond can conceive of” (Jennings 13). Richard’s journal entries are full of stereotyped notions of the region and the people who live there. After arriving in Appalachia, Richard describes his surroundings based on his expectations: “Black Rock appeared to conform in every particular to my great-aunt’s and

uncle's descriptions [...] So beautiful this little town, like a town of fifty years ago, an idealized kind of town. A person could live here, certainly. A person could more than make do. I imagined box suppers, bingo games, hoedowns, the hearty jolly peasantry of these hills" (Smith 111).

Richard's experiences in Appalachia expose the inaccuracy of his simple, pastoral vision. What he finds instead is the tradition of schoolteacher's living in local homes with no privacy, inedible food, and people wary of 'foreigners.' He secludes himself to living alone in the schoolhouse because "proximity to reality is not conducive to maintaining romantic illusions" (Jones 108).

Richard avoids talking to his mountain lover, Dory, about her family's moonshine business, her father's murder, or her brothers' quest for vengeance. He refuses to see the danger and violence that often accompanies mountain life. He judges Dory's father harshly for his moonshine business, calling him "a common criminal, and to involve his own family in these activities" (Smith 131). His friend Aldous Rife corrects Richard's insensitive assumption: "I wouldn't be so quick to judge, young fellow, if I was you [...] Now you've been up to that holler, and you've seen how many folks Almarine Cantrell has got to feed. And you seen the land up there, and the hardships" (Smith 131). Richard, in fact, is ignorant to the hardships because his "idealistic perspective prevents him from understanding either Dory or her mountain culture" (Jones 109).

Richard's arrogance is evident when he confesses his superiority to the mountain people due to his possession of a higher education, "I saw myself then in her eyes as some superior being from another place, with a fund of "knowledge" beyond her ken. Thus I realized how I must seem to her. I understood my position and my responsibility" (Smith 130). It does not occur to Richard that his classroom education does not hold much weight, if any, in surviving the harsh conditions of mountain life. Traditionally, the children work on the farm so that they can help produce food and some sort of income. Whether or not they are able to do calculus or speak

using proper syntax will not adversely affect their lives. The mountain children do receive an education; it is just a different education from what Richard is accustomed to. He describes his students as “wizened and already woebegone grownups who expect nothing more from life than the subsistence their parents have torn from these mountains” (Smith 116). Richard does not understand that these children may want to stay in the mountains because that is their life and where their family is. He thinks that everyone shares his same desire and need to take a ‘pilgrimage’ of sorts, and if they do not, then they are doomed to a “black life” in the coalmines and lumber camps of the mountains (Smith 116).

Lee Smith reintroduces Richard at the end of book three to reiterate how permanent and influential these mountain stereotypes are, even to people who have lived within and experienced their culture. Richard returns to Black Rock disguised as a photographer, believing himself to be “a new man, a confident man, so different from the boy who had left here ten years back” (Smith 217). Yet, he still cannot escape his idealized vision of Appalachia for he returns to “capture a bit of the past” (Smith 217). Richard forms a new theory of life based on his photography, unfortunately it is just as restricted as his original perspective, “[...] my theory of photography if not life itself: the way a frame, a photograph, can illuminate and enlarge one’s vision rather than limit it. Frankly, I find this theory an *apologia* for the settled life” (Smith 223). Soos believes that Richard comes full circle in his revelation, “Instead of seeking completeness through a confrontation with the mysterious, the mystical, he now prefers to peek out from a viewfinder at the world. And his pictures distort as well as limit what he sees” (Soos 23). Reality is too uncomfortable for Richard, he chooses to observe rather than participate.

Richard does, finally, gain some sort of realization when he notices the destruction of the lumber companies, saying “Something I had thought nothing of it at the time, which caused me

to wonder what else I might have missed! What else might have made no impression” (Smith 224). Richard, just as Jennifer, saw his mountain experiences as a means to find himself, never once considering the effects he had on the people he came in contact with. “Richard, the man who had intended to serve Appalachia, makes it the subject of his art when he returns. Once again Appalachia serves him” (Jones 110). He seeks to profit from his photographs, just as the local-color writers did with their stories. Their writings were intended to entertain, not educate, and therefore do not present a comprehensive or realistic portrayal of Appalachian people or their culture. These images produced a lasting effect on the mountain region and caused its people to become marginalized.

Book four of the novel introduces the reader to a modern Cantrell family member named Sally, who is the daughter of Richard Burlage and his mountain lover Dory. Sally continues to tell the Cantrell family history beginning with her mother’s suicide. Like Granny, Sally does not spare the reader any details so that we hear the true stories of her family. All of her siblings, including herself, left the mountains in hopes of finding a more appealing life. Life outside of Appalachia did not prove to be to be what they expected and eventually returned to the mountains. Smith’s characters Richard and Jennifer came to Appalachia to find their true selves, the same reason that Sally and her siblings left.

Lee Smith’s novel *Oral History* depicts how the disconnect between Appalachia and the outside world continues to reoccur throughout history. By providing the reader with intricate and personal details of her characters, as well as juxtaposing inside and outside perspectives, we are able to gain a new appreciation of Appalachian culture. *Oral History* takes the reader on a journey into the lives of a previously mysterious and peculiar population, forcing us to realize our misconceptions and then counteracting them. Smith allows the reader to relate to her

characters in order to break this pattern of misunderstanding by providing them with a broader view of Appalachian tradition and beliefs. Smith's novel transcends time and geographical boundaries because damaging stereotypes exist everywhere and need to be realized so that we can become more accepting of those we do not understand.

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