

"I'M GLAD I GAVE ALL MY HEART": THE FICTION OF LEE SMITH

Danielle N. Johnson

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Approved by:

Linda Wagner-Martin

Minrose C. Gwin

H. Fred Hobson

Maria DeGuzmán

Bland Simpson

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ABSTRACT

Danielle Johnson: "I'm Glad I Gave All My Heart": The Fiction of Lee Smith
(Under the direction of Minrose C. Gwin)

This dissertation examines Lee Smith's fiction published between 1968 and 2010. By examining Smith's novels and stories together, I trace the progression of her ideas about female subjectivity and the value of self-expression. As Smith develops these ideas, she discusses specific ways that women relate to literacy, artistry, religion, history, and sexuality, among other concerns. Using Smith's publications, book reviews, interviews, and secondary criticism, I analyze her contribution as a writer of contemporary Appalachian and Southern fiction. Smith's first four novels feature protagonists with few options for personal fulfillment, but works published later in her career provide examples of women leading authentic lives. I argue that Smith accomplishes feminist cultural work in her writing by telling the untold stories of unrecognized female artists and questioning dominant historical narratives. She complements this thematic focus with the structure of her novels, which frequently feature multiple first-person narrators, as well as fictionalized historical documents such as diary entries, court records, and song lyrics. Though critics sometimes have treated Smith as a writer of local color and sentimental fiction, the formal innovation and thematic rigor that characterize her publications are deceptively complex.

To Bryce, Phineas, Jenny, and Linda

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BMB</i>	<i>Black Mountain Breakdown</i>
<i>Christmas</i>	<i>The Christmas Letters</i>
<i>Darcy</i>	<i>Mrs. Darcy Meets the Blue-Eyed Stranger at the Beach</i>
<i>Dogbushes</i>	<i>The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed</i>
<i>Dream</i>	<i>The Devil's Dream</i>
<i>Eclipse</i>	<i>Me and My Baby View the Eclipse</i>
<i>FATL</i>	<i>Fair and Tender Ladies</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>Family Linen</i>
<i>Last</i>	<i>The Last Girls</i>
<i>News</i>	<i>News of the Spirit</i>
<i>OAH</i>	<i>On Agate Hill</i>
<i>OH</i>	<i>Oral History</i>
<i>SG</i>	<i>Saving Grace</i>
<i>Sitting</i>	<i>Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia</i>
<i>Something</i>	<i>Something in the Wind</i>

Introduction

In his seminal essay "Caste, Class, and Canon," Paul Lauter defines goals for the future of feminist criticism. "It need always," he writes, "to be asking how its project is changing the world, reconstructing history as well as consciousness, so that the accomplishments of women can be fully valued and, more important, so that the lives of women and men can more fully be lived" (Lauter 148). He sets these aims in opposition to a critical rhetoric that is "neutral, simply analytic, [or] formal," arguing that such criticism is descriptive rather than transformative, and thus only minimally worth producing. Though he writes generally of "women and men" here, Lauter especially is interested in working class artists and the historical variety of their output throughout his essay. "...Working class art," he notes, "often is produced in group situations, rather than in the privacy of a study – or garret – and it is similarly experienced in the hall, the church, the work-site, the quilting bee, the picket line." He supports empowerment of such art, which often goes not just unheralded, but, also, unknown.

While Lauter's essay is an appeal mostly to feminist critics, the perspective he writes from and the goals that he calls for also can be advanced through fiction. In the course of her nearly 50-year long career, the author Lee Smith has successfully accomplished much of the work that Lauter prescribes. Smith's novels and stories frequently highlight unheralded small town talents, many of whom would not call

themselves “artists.” From self-employed seamstresses making slipcovers to front porch musicians playing fiddles, Smith creates characters whose humble art, she suggests, remains an accomplishment despite its obscurity.¹ In Smith’s oeuvre, a piece of art’s value mostly is to its creator, whose considered self-expression it represents. She underscores the importance of identity in her fiction by often writing in the first-person voices of rural women, further challenging through her narration what Lauter has called “special privilege,” or, “the special languages that specially-trained critics share with specially-cultivated poets.” Such specialized languages, Lauter argues, exist mostly to defend the perceived value of both certain works of art and the criticism that addresses them. By her rejection of formal language in favor of colloquial, and official histories for subjective ones, Smith upends traditional measures of artistic value. By focusing on the lives of storytellers and other artists, Smith also asserts the historical significance of widely unheard narratives. Above all, Smith champions female subjectivity at nearly any cost.

Smith’s challenges to conceptions of art and personal success are both class-conscious and gender-based. Though her rural narrators occasionally come from or into money, they rarely become wealthy from the practice of their crafts. Instead, following their passions often leads Smith’s characters away from financial security. Ivy Rowe, for instance, the hero of Smith’s 1988 novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, can neither leave her hometown to pursue a prestigious education – she becomes pregnant, gives birth, and

¹ I use “suggests,” here, because Smith’s fiction generally is not preachy or didactic. However, in her interviews and talks, Smith does more than just suggest that art of this kind is worthwhile. She explicitly states that it is. In 1989, for instance, she told Pat Arnow, “I just got real interested in the idea of somebody’s letters being a work of art. You know, letters over their whole lifetime. Is it art because there’s a critic somewhere who perceives it as art? Or is it art because it just is?” (Arnow 62).

won't abandon her child – or marry her rich, reckless suitor, Franklin Ransom, whose unstable character prevents her from ever identifying with him. Though either course might have made Ivy's life a more financially comfortable one, she rejects both and instead remains near her rural home, Sugar Fork, where her writing goes unnoticed and her choices mostly are her own. Like Ivy, most of the artists Smith depicts fight – against time, obligation, social censure – just to be able to follow their passions, rather than fighting for financial success. This sort of conflict especially is typical for her female characters, many of whom are not only consumed with negotiating their identities as artists, but also their identities as mothers, daughters, and wives. Susan, the narrator of Smith's first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968), is only 9 years old, but her own creative mind and the artistic output of those around her enormously influence her developing self-conceptions. Susan's childhood artistry mostly remains imaginative rather than concrete; she attributes magical qualities to everything from her parents' household help to her own head, which she believes changes properties with each new season. While she uses her own imagination to cement her identification with her childhood friends, she also uses it to distance herself from her mother, "the Queen," and to make sense of her parents' strained relationship (her father is not the King, and it is the Baron who has her mother's attention). Her father's emotional and often dark paintings, which feature her mother as sexualized object, compel Susan to empathize with her father and inform her eventual recognition of sexuality and perversity in her own circle of friends.

From Susan onward, the central characters of Smith's most resonant novels and stories are women of all stripes trying to know themselves and, sometimes, to own their

art. The forces that stand in the way of their aims and instincts often are well meaning; relatives of female artists, for instance, urge adherence to tradition or social convention. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, for instance, Ivy composes beautiful letters, many of which she never sends. Her mother implores her to work rather than to write when she is young, and, later, the responsibilities that come with raising her own children prevent her from spending much time on her craft. Despite these and other obstacles, however, Ivy amasses a prodigious number of letters over the course of her lifetime, finding in her writing a sustaining sense of herself: Linda Wagner-Martin rightly has called Ivy's writing "the natural expression of [her] conflicted and complex human heart" (Wagner-Martin 22). When, near death, Ivy chooses to burn the letters, she describes their importance to her daughter, Joli. "With every one I burned," she writes, "my soul grew lighter, lighter, as if it rose too with the smoke....The letters didn't mean anything....It was the writing of them, that signified" (*FATL* 313). The act of creation is essential for Ivy in a way that her letters are not; she ultimately prefers to be left with the writing process rather than its result. Ivy's project is her self, and she is an embodiment of the writing she has done. Ivy illustrates Minrose Gwin's assertion that "we continually construct ourselves as we produce the narratives of our own lives" (Gwin 871).

Smith's use of diaries and oral narratives reflects her emphases on literacy and creativity, however personal, as valuable means of expression. Lillian Robinson refers to real-life counterparts of the fictional Ivy Rowe when she describes how, in recent years, more – and more diverse – women began to eke out recognition as "good" writers. "Feminist scholarship," she claims, "has also pushed back the boundaries of literature in other directions, considering a wide range of forms and styles in which

women's writing – especially that of women who did not perceive themselves as writers – appears. In this way, women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and private poetry have come under critical scrutiny as evidence of women's consciousness *and expression*" (Robinson 124). Robinson highlights here the importance of writing as a means of expression, so central to Ivy Rowe's lifelong impulse to write. In her fiction, Smith expands the boundaries of noteworthy expression to include the artistry of women with talents besides writing. Florrie, for instance, a character in the 1981 short story, "Cakewalk" (from the collection of the same name), is an eccentric but masterful baker and decorator of cakes; Candy Snipes, of 1985's *Family Linen*, is a small town beautician. Both women are able to live from the profits of their artistry, though neither is at all wealthy; they stand out as particularly fulfilled characters in Smith's oeuvre because they make a living doing what they love.

It would be overly sentimental to say that Smith "celebrates" all sorts of women's artistry, but her fiction shows that she recognizes and respects the skill and passion that her female characters invest in their various pursuits. Smith also recognizes creative output as important for self-knowledge and survival. In the 1990 story, "Bob, a Dog," newly-divorced Cheryl gains a feeling of control over her life as a single mother by sewing sought after slipcovers. Cheryl's are domestic artifacts so humble that they soak up children's spills and swaddle television-watching adults, but they enable her to earn a living and connect her to her relatively supportive social community. In her fiction and her life, Smith challenges the primacy of art that is perceived as sophisticated. "It's like the knitting of a sweater, the making of the quilt, and that kind of thing," Smith has said, "that something is art even though it's not

perceived as public art. It's the difference between monumental sculpture and needlepoint" (Arnow 63).

Like Ivy, Florrie and Candy each find their media of expression discouraged and belittled by family members, particularly female ones. Florrie's prim sister, Stella, for instance, "wouldn't be caught dead" in her sister's clothes, which consist of "running shoes, at her age, and wooly white athletic socks...and whatever else her eye lights on when she wakes up" (*Cake* 226). Florrie's obsession with the cakes she creates, paired with her disregard for her physical appearance, render her "a town character," something Stella laments that she was "not raised to be" (*Cake* 227). In her dismay over her creative sister's ways, Stella is the literary predecessor of Sybill Hess, Candy's sister in *Family Linen*. Speaking with her therapist, Sybill marvels that Candy is "a beautician by choice," and describes their mother's dismay that Candy did not go to college. "Candy is just infantile, even now," she says; "that's one reason I'm glad I live here, so I don't have to see Candy all the time" (*Cake* 37). Stella and Sybill each cite the subversion of their mothers' values as cause to disdain their sisters' artistry, and each reveals reasons for her own repression in condemning her sister's choices (Sybill especially is practiced at repression, having buried her childhood memory of watching her mother kill her step-father). Smith writes sympathetically of even her repressed characters, however, affording Stella, Sybill, and their ilk a chance to speak their pieces. Her take on Roger Lee, for instance, a Southern politician in *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980) who is rather easy to cast as a villain, is quite generous: "I meant Roger Lee to be a good person," Smith has said, "just sort of limited in certain ways....I think he's just as nice as he *can* be, given certain human limitations" (Arnold 11).

If individuals present well-meaning challenges to subjectivity in Smith's fiction, entire communities often are more vicious. In an early essay, "Infection in the Sentence," Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss the effect that a censorious community can have on a female artist. A woman who seeks to write, they argue, must confront literary authorities who "attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar 23). As with the arguments of the other critics I have referenced, those of Gilbert and Gubar can be expanded to include female artists of all sorts.

Their belief that women often are reduced to "extreme stereotypes" especially is illustrated in Smith's *Oral History*. The novel opens with an ill-fated romance between Almarine Cantrell and a woman known only as "Red Emmy," a character so bewitching that she is supposed to possess dark and magical powers. Though Emmy likely is simply the alluring yet damaged product of a starkly impoverished and abusive single father, the 19th century mountain community in which she lives is quick to label her a witch, a too-old-for-him woman draining Almarine of his vitality through sexuality. "Red Emmy," a narrator observes, "worked all day and she rode all night and she never slept" (*OH* 53). Emmy's habits, however, do not render her a hard-working, determined woman in the eyes of her peers. Instead, those peers note how "a witch don't need no sleep," labeling even her most helpful behavior transgressive. While Emmy narrated a section of *Oral History* in one of Smith's drafts of the novel, she ultimately becomes

voiceless in the published version, revealed to Smith's audience only through the narration of other characters.

Women in Smith's early novels who are like Emmy, without social position, talent, or some other trait significant enough to inform an identity, usually are doomed: their communities are inclined to push them over the edge rather than to support them. This trend reached its apex in Smith's *Black Mountain Breakdown*. In that work, Crystal Spangler is so defined by others and so paralyzed by choice that she retreats into a catatonic state; she becomes only a beautiful shell. Crystal is a good teacher and a good writer, but she does not identify enough with either talent to forge a sense of self. Smith practically could have been fictionalizing Gilbert and Gubar's 1979 essay here, tying Crystal as she does to mirrors, crystals, and other things with reflective properties. They write: "'Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about – perhaps even loathing of – her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphorical looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to 'reduce' her own body" (Gilbert and Gubar 27). As Smith's career progressed, however, she began to believe in better outcomes for the women in her narratives. As Nancy Parrish puts it, "Her early stories describe girls and young women who have been literally or figuratively silenced, limited, or raped. Her later novels reveal women who have resisted cultural restraints, found their own voices, and succeeded at unique life goals that oppose conventional expectations" (Parrish 166). Katie Cocker, a third-generation songwriter and successful singer in *The Devil's Dream* (1992) often is cited as a woman who typifies a hero of Smith's fiction from the mid-1980's, forward. Katie tries on

different identities as a singer determined by her family, producers, and boyfriends, but ultimately settles into lyrics and music that are uniquely hers.

Smith's more optimistic writerly perspective on possibilities for women includes the increased possibility of positive community support. When Ivy Rowe's father dies, one rural neighbor builds his coffin, while others carry it to the family burying ground. Community compassion also extends to the small town Ivy moves to after his death; she lives in a boarding house where community constantly is changing, but remains mostly sustaining. Contemporary communities can be difficult for Smith's characters to access – Mary, a protagonist in *The Christmas Letters* (1996), spends time mostly with her young children until they are grown and she begins taking college courses – but usually are only a phone call away in times of need. Cheryl of “Bob, A Dog,” for instance, leans on her mother, sister, and close friend after her husband leaves her, using their support as a sort of safety net as she becomes an independent single mother. Wagner-Martin points out a particular appeal of communities to Smith. “Knowledge, useful and life-giving knowledge,” she writes, “comes in much of [Southern women's] fiction from human sources rather than print – from people, living and dead, from their voices, from their accumulated experience” (Wagner-Martin 21). Smith accesses the strengths of communities to build convincing worlds around her characters, continuing her stylistic habit of privileging the oral over the written.

Romantic relationships in Smith's fiction represent the best and worst possibilities for an individual in relation to her community. The most successful romances in her work consistently are those in which both partners enjoy talking to one another; the least successful often unravel because of assumptions and

miscommunications. *Oral History* provides pointed examples of both sorts of relationships. In one, beautiful mountain girl Dory Cantrell is objectified and idealized by her educated Richmond lover, Richard Burlage. Without her own section to narrate in the novel, Dory's character is revealed almost exclusively through the voices of Richard and other members of her community. No narrator offers a satisfying portrait of Dory, but Richard's is especially shortsighted; readers learn more from his omissions and offhand comments than they do from his attempts at reflection on his lover. After the first time they have intercourse, for instance, Dory informs Richard that her father has been murdered. He responds by stroking her breast and marveling that "[he] could not even see this girl [he] lay with in the dark" (*OH* 155). While Richard emphasizes physical blindness, readers understand that he also cannot "see" Dory's character. This failure is underscored when Richard tries to take a picture of his lover. As the critic Corinne Dale points out, Dory does not show up in the photograph. Richard can no more "capture...the mountain culture," she argues, than he can "frame...or entitle (take possession of) Dory" (Dale 188). She remains for Richard a symbol of untamed beauty and sexuality, rather than a complicated and hurting person.

An alternative to the intense but ill-fated romance Richard and Dory pursue is presented through Dory's adult daughter, Sally. An unpretentious woman in her second marriage, Sally professes her love for both talking to her husband Roy and having sex with him. "Roy can fuck your eyes out," she proudly says, "and talking all the time. 'Talk to me,' he says. Well I like that" (*OH* 233). Unlike Dory, Sally also tells her own story in her own words, underscoring the importance of individual expression in her relationship. Sally's openness means that she lacks her mother's aura of beauty and

mystery, but Smith invites readers to see this as a positive absence. Sally trades mystique for happiness, and avoids her mother's tragic end. By combining physical passion with a desire to tell their tales to one another, Roy and Sally exemplify the ideal Lee Smith relationship.

Though Sally and Roy marry, characters in this sort of relationship do not always. Ivy Rowe, for instance, enjoys a restorative but brief escape with an alluring traveler called Honey Breeding, while Sharon Shaw of "Me and My Baby View the E" (1990) spends three years in a fulfilling affair with her flamboyant lover, Raymond.² Raymond represents a distinctive type in Smith's fiction. He "speaks dramatically, emphasizing certain words. He flings his arms around. He wears huge silky handkerchiefs and gold neck-chains and drives all the way to Roanoke to get his hair cut in what he calls a modified punk look" (*MAMB* 191). An object of ridicule in his small town, Raymond is an unlikely romantic lead whose difference is part of his attraction for Sharon. Smith presents a similar character in *The Last Girls* (2002), pairing her prim society wife, Courtney, with an overweight but stylish and amusing florist, Gene. Neither Sharon nor Courtney ultimately has the courage to fundamentally change their lives by taking their affairs to the next step – Sharon leaves Raymond when her daughter sees him at their house, while Courtney feels obligated to care for her ill husband – despite the sense of loss they experience when they break off the affairs. For

² Ivy's relationship with Honey Breeding illustrates the high stakes that Smith invests in romantic relationships. Though exhilarating, their tryst also proves devastating for Ivy, who discovers upon her return home that her daughter, Lulda, has died. Even a fulfilling relationship in Smith's novels can be bound up in tragedy; *Agate Hill*'s Molly Petree survives an equally tragic passion when Jacky Jarvis, her philandering husband to whom she nevertheless feels spiritually bound, is murdered and she stands accused of killing him.

a while, though, Raymond and Gene represent possibility and excitement for their passion-starved partners.

As she highlights female artistry and identity in settings from the early 19th century forward, Smith necessarily questions dominant historical narratives. Reassessing the roles of women in history requires Smith to reassess history, itself. As Gilbert and Gubar have written, “If [we ask] where does a woman writer ‘fit in’ to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom describes? – we have to answer that a woman writer does not ‘fit in.’ At first glance, indeed, she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider” (Gilbert and Gubar 23). Smith redefines history in her fiction by examining her outsiders’ plights, but also by creating some historical spaces in which they need not be outsiders. In *On Agate Hill* (2006) for instance, Smith undermines Civil War tropes through the writing of her character Molly Petree, an antebellum orphan whose diary grounds the novel. Descended from a stereotypically genteel South Carolina family, Molly struggles to understand the legacy of her dead mother, Alice, by remembering and retelling her family’s history. Molly eventually discovers that the ladylike Alice once was in love with a blacksmith’s son, Simon, and that Simon, who seems now to be a commanding, wealthy Southern gentleman, made his fortune in Brazil after the war. Simon’s story is surprising to Molly and, probably, to many of Smith’s readers. By mining relatively obscure historical records – the expatriated *Confederados*, particularly – Smith suggests the breadth of history that underlies what is most recorded and taught.

In emphasizing this breadth, Smith often examines the past in rural locales and domestic settings, elevating the everyday to the realm of history. In addition to her unconventional coverage of the Civil War in *On Agate Hill*, Smith describes, in that same novel, learning and teaching in the antebellum period. As a teenager, Molly Petree attends an expensive, religiously affiliated girls' school in Eastern Virginia, and goes on, as young woman, to instruct relatively poor mountain children of all ages in a one-room schoolhouse. Using historical research as a basis for her narrative, Smith gives the postbellum home front attention often reserved in history texts for tales of the battlefield or courtroom. Similarly, in *The Devil's Dream*, Smith's take on the beginnings of country music, the author dwells largely in the hollers and hills of Western Virginia, moving the novel to Nashville only in its later narrative. By tracing the origins of her subject to the rural mountains, Smith issues a gentle reminder that country music did not begin in an eruption of rhinestones and cowboy hats. She instead situates the origins of the genre at the messy intersection of religion and good-time music, telling the stories of divided mountain families.

The history and institution of religion, too, come under scrutiny in Smith's fiction, particularly because of the patriarchal control it often is marshaled to support. Ivy Rowe especially is outspoken about her inability to accept the Christian doctrine espoused by much of her mountain community. Though Ivy feels a spiritual connection to the physical elements of her surroundings – ice crystals, spring breezes, glistening branches – she feels little emotional connection to religious services. She cannot stomach the hypocrisy of many of the Christian men she encounters. Critic Conrad Ostwalt persuasively argues that in *Fair and Tender Ladies* and elsewhere, Smith relies

on images to convey a “dual religious consciousness” in her writing. The first, he says, “appears in the form of traditional religions that attempt to transcend the mountain peaks and valley floors” while the second “is characterized by an elemental, supernatural power bound up by nature and the mountains themselves” (Ostwalt 98). Smith consistently is more sympathetic to an “elemental” spirituality in her fiction, but she occasionally does feature a protagonist who finds a way for herself as a Christian. In *Saving Grace* (1995) particularly, the victim of a philandering, evangelical father eventually finds comfort and salvation in Christianity as practiced by her gentle, ethereal, mother. Though Grace is scarred by her father and later by her marriage to the kind but ascetic minister Travis Word, she seeks a different, more feminine, approach to Christianity instead of abandoning it entirely. By including relatively unconventional sources of spiritual inspiration and religious practice in her fiction, Smith again underscores her regard for individual expression and the need for opposition to forces that seek to limit it.

In some respects, Smith as writer is participating in the reshaping of cultural memory as she highlights unsung artists and encourages skepticism about institutional histories. As explained by Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, cultural memory is “the juncture where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called upon to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity. The individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony, or performance, also serves as a challenge and a countermemory to official hegemonic history” (Hirsch 7). Smith’s novels and stories are full of countermemories, from Alice Petree’s love for the son of her wealthy family’s blacksmith in *On Agate Hill*, to a

reimagining of country music's conception in *The Devil's Dream*. However, Smith doesn't simply create her own alternate, illustrative history. Instead, she encourages her readership to share their own experiences, to shape history through their own stories. In her fiction, Smith does this through her extensive use of vernacular, first-person voice. If plainspoken Joe, the narrator of Smith's 1990 story "Dreamers," is worthy of publication – "I got a wife," he says, "We live with my moma and my sister Janice" – then surely most characters have a story worth hearing (*MAMB* 117).

In Smith's own life, she directly has encouraged participatory history through her compilation of *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (2000). Faced with the knowledge that Grundy, her hometown, was about to be purposefully flooded, abandoned, and then rebuilt on higher ground, Smith sought to record the townspeople's memories to preserve something of its past. Composed mostly of interviews completed by high school students, the oral history eschews conventional, formal artistry for the vernacular of mostly elderly town residents. For instance, the book includes the story of Inez Ramey, who tells two high school students about her first business, selling used clothes to women in Grundy. "I made lots of money now, girls, back in the days when I worked in the used clothes.... I had all of this money under the linoleum." When Grundy was about to flood, Inez "didn't know whether to go get that money, or to just leave it. I had to run, but I got it. Yeah, I got my money" (*Courthouse* 32). Inez's story, like those that surround it, is structured only by her own, conversational words. "In this book we are simply telling our own stories in our own words," Smith writes in the book's introduction, "in the belief that our voices will blend

to create a vibrant testimony to the life of this whole community.... Each person has his own tale to tell" (*Courthouse* 18).

Though Smith's fiction is not especially autobiographical, collectively, it conveys much of Smith's own "tale." Born in Grundy, Virginia, in 1944, Smith thought as a young writer that her work should focus on places and persons more exciting than those in her hometown. Her first novel, for instance, which she wrote at the age of eight, revolved around famous protagonists and cross-country locales. In *Jane Russell and Adlai Stevenson Go West in a Covered Wagon*, the title characters eventually marry and convert to Mormonism. Smith's focus on the relatively exotic continued into college, until she encountered the fiction of the Appalachian writer James Still. As critic Jeanne McDonald puts it, "until the moment she finished Still's book, her convoluted plots had been based on stewardesses' adventures in Hawaii and the machinations of evil twins" (J. McDonald 178). After *River of Earth*, however, which includes a reference to Grundy, Smith "was suddenly struck by the wealth of stories and characters she had left behind in Grundy" (J. McDonald 178). Smith didn't turn immediately to Appalachian tradition and history in her work, but she began to write – as in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968) and *Fancy Strut* (1973) – about familiar, small-town Southern locales instead of distant places. Though she has continued occasionally to set stories and novels outside of Appalachia, her best fiction – *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, *On Agate Hill* – is tied to that region and Smith's own experiences as a talented young woman living there.

Smith's recognition of the narrative possibilities her homeland offered was reflective of a broader twentieth century movement to reshape perceptions of

Appalachia. As early as the 1930's, "poets and fiction writers native to the mountain region began to render the experiences of ordinary Appalachian people realistically, honestly, and sympathetically" (Miller xi). The writers' attention to realism was, at least in part, reactive against persistent characterizations of the region as "hillbilly," a post-Civil War stereotype that remains today. By the time Smith began writing about Appalachia, redemptive writerly efforts by the likes of James Still and Harriette Arnow had begun to yield results. In the 1970's, "a modern-day 'handing down' of cultural knowledge from one generation to another [took] place as a modern Appalachian sense of *identity*, at once old and new, burst across the mountain ranges. From this decade of creative foment came a remarkable Appalachian literary and cultural renaissance" (Miller xii). The cultural knowledge Smith mined is apparent in her fiction: storytelling, musicality, Pentecostalism, handiwork, and specific domestic traditions all are inclusions that tie Smith to Appalachia.

Smith's position as a Southern writer, too, has been shaped by the eventful decades during which she emerged as a writer. As Fred Hobson has observed, conceptions of what constituted "the South" rapidly began to change at the same time that Smith was beginning to publish fiction. "The reality – and, even more, the mythology – of the poor, failed, defeated, backward-looking South," he writes, "has long since been replaced by the mythology of what in the 1970's came to be called the Sun Belt" (Hobson 4). Smith published *Something in the Wind* (1971) and *Fancy Strut* (1973) – novels mostly set in North Carolina and Alabama, respectively, rather than in Smith's mountains – just as, Hobson points out, the age of air-conditioning and *Southern Living* emerged. Clearly conscious of changing modalities in the South, Smith features a prim,

racist, newspaper heiress in *Fancy Strut*, setting her in opposition to members of the town's younger, mostly middle class population, people which the heiress considers hopelessly vulgar. Smith does not valorize the old guard or the new, however; each is the recipient of the most satirical treatment of her career.

The beginning of Smith's career as a published writer also coincided with the height of the Civil Rights movement, which she directly and indirectly references in her first three novels. The historian Joel Williamson has described the intellectual climate at universities in the 1960's, when Smith attended college and began publishing: "It was as if [C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955)], along with the Civil Rights movement itself, blasted to smithereens a dam and allowed pent-up scholarly concerns to pour out and flood the lands below" (Williamson 17). Hollins, the private, Southern women's college that Smith attended, was not immune to the conversation. As Nancy C. Parrish writes, at Hollins, "Anne Goodwyn Jones wrote feature columns in the newspaper about race relations and student issues, and other writers such as Cindy Hardwick and Nancy Beckham wrote subsequent extensions and explorations of those arguments" (Parrish 110). Smith, too, was clearly paying attention to the conversation. Among her most classifiably Southern works, the novels *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, *Something in the Wind*, and *Fancy Strut* each include African American characters, many of whom act in opposition to racial discrimination. These acts are subtle in some cases – Frank, the family landscaper in *Dogbushes*, refuses to speak to his white employers, relishing small acts of subversion – and more pointed in others. In *Fancy Strut*, for instance, members of the local college's Afro-American Society attempt to sue the local sheriff for discrimination. Though their cause is noble, the Society's

motivations are not. One rich student agrees to the lawsuit because he doesn't like sharing dormitory bathrooms, while his ringleader friend is desperate for publicity. Smith refuses to idealize characters of either race, and thereby offers a deceptively complex take on Southern race relations.

When Smith began writing novels and stories set in Appalachia, however, African American characters largely disappeared from her fiction; these conspicuous absences, which, together, span decades, separate Smith's fiction from that of many other contemporary Southern writers. Mostly, Smith explains, she left out African American characters because of the real lack of racial diversity that she saw in the Appalachia of her childhood. "There were no black people in the county where I grew up," she has said, "I was never aware of them" (V. Smith 75). Though realistic, Smith's explanation remains problematic for some critics. Jocelyn Hazelwood-Donlon, for instance, argues that Smith is an example of an author who uses "storytelling voices which implicitly position racial audiences as primary and secondary (Hazelwood-Donlon 32). It also is true that, despite the lack of an African American population in Grundy, men and women of color have and do call Appalachia home. The so-called "Affrilachian Poets," for instance, formed a writers' group in Lexington, Kentucky, in the early 1990's. According to the critic Theresa L. Burriss, the literary emphases of the Affrilachians resemble Smith's. "A focus on ancestors, common people, and their role in shaping identity pervades their writing," she notes (Burriss 316). Though Smith herself did not come in contact with African Americans in her corner of Appalachia, they, too, are part of her region's story.

None of this is to say, however, that Smith ignored racial difference in her career. Rather, she mostly has written outside of the black-white binary that has sometimes characterized Southern literature. Katerina Prajznerova has written a study of Cherokee elements in four of Smith's novels, highlighting the way Appalachian storytelling and healing traditions, among other rituals, can be attributed to Cherokee influence in the region. "Traditional Cherokee culture and Smith's Appalachian novels," she argues, "share a belief that nature is a living spiritual force and that stories are organic cultural sources within nature" (Praj. 40). Smith also has included racially distinct characters in her narratives, marking them as different without specifying their origins. The most prominent of these characters are Ora Mae and Vashti Cantrell of *Oral History*, both of whom "look like they might be part Indian" according to characters in the novel (OH 86). In a 2001 interview with Prajznerová, Smith confirms her intention that Vashti and Ora Mae be read as Native Americans. "I've always been really fascinated with...this sense of the other...I was just always so curious bout Melungeons or about Indians or about people that lived way, way up in the hills" (Praj. 109). The former group that Smith mentions, Melungeons, also figure prominently in *The Devil's Dream*. In that novel, the artistic family patriarch is descended from Melungeons, "a race of people which nobody knows where they came from, with real pale light eyes, and dark skin, and frizzy hair like sheep's wool" (DD 57). Through her inclusion of racially ambiguous characters, Smith signals her willingness to engage issues of racism and difference outside of the black-white binary.

Smith's fiction is more typical of Southern writing in its attention to gender and class. Rather than exploring class dichotomies between a mythic Southern aristocracy

and their “subjects,” however, Smith has continued to set up and analyze class conflicts in what would be considered middle to low classes. A doctor’s wife with a home near a golf course, for instance, feels uncomfortable with her gas station-running relatives in *Family Linen*. What conflicts such as these often boil down to for Smith are the insecurities that surface when ambitious, or at least upwardly mobile, family members confront their unpretentious kin. Smith’s South is the Sun Belt without its shiny gloss; she gives her readers *Southern Living* by way of the trailer park. Though Smith has downplayed class divisions as much of an influence in Grundy, she acknowledges that separation existed between children reared in town and those born in the nearby mountain hollers. “Our fortunes didn’t depend on whether the mines were working or not,” Smith recalls, “the unions were striking, and so on. Our fathers just didn’t get killed right and left, or lose their arms” (Bourne 53). Smith stayed with cousins in company towns, but she also was crowned Miss Grundy High and eventually educated at St. Catherine’s; she was of Grundy, yet separate.

Smith has been compared to her contemporaries writing fiction set in Appalachia, particularly Bobbie Ann Mason, but also to writers firmly entrenched in the South, many of whom came before her. Comparisons to Mason largely stem from the writers’ sometimes overlapping subject matter, which includes unpretentious men and women in their modest homes. Television shows, diets, and romantic relationships often are the stuff of characters’ lives in the works of both writers. Smith, however, graciously disputes comparisons much as she does classifications. “In terms of themes, we pretty much deal with a lot of the same thing,” she acknowledged of Mason, “Her prose style though is so much more controlled, it’s just beautifully controlled” (Arnold

14). The trouble of truly assigning a label to Smith is evident in even a brief look at the other writers to whom Smith has been compared. H.H. Campbell, for instance, ties Smith to the Brontë sisters, noting areas in which Smith's plotting and naming of characters seem to have been influenced by the British writers. Hobson, on the other hand, draws a more intuitive link between Smith and William Faulkner, a comparison echoed by Margaret D. Bauer in her 2005 study, *William Faulkner's Legacy*. Bauer cites "numerous echoes of [Faulknerian] techniques, issues, and character types" in *Oral History*, particularly, but also suggests ways in which reading Smith changes or challenges interpretations of Faulkner. "Smith's reincarnation of Faulkner's Quentin prototype in the character of Richard Burlage," she argues, "illuminates how great a role these would-be knights actually play in the oppression of rather than rescuing of southern ladies" (Bauer 8). Smith has been linked, too, to Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. She has for years mentored the writer Jill McCorkle. At her most slyly subversive, her tales of the Southern upper middle class remind the reader of Ellen Gilchrist's work.

Alongside the Appalachian and Southern tropes she frequently deals in, Smith's fiction also is filled with directly personal remembrances and conflicts. "Tongues of Fire" (1990), a story about a young woman's ecstatic Christianity, draws on Smith's own brief but intense penchant for attending religious revivals. A general store in the 1996 novella *The Christmas Letters* recalls the one owned and operated by Smith's father, Ernest. Still, specific incidences from her life appear less often than general motifs. Storytellers in her work, for instance, occasionally were inspired by members of her father's sprawling mountain family, a group of "world class talkers" (McCord 153).

Smith often situates parts of novels and stories in women's schools, which she herself attended (Smith briefly enrolled in a Richmond private high school, St. Catherine's, and completed her undergraduate degree at Roanoke's Hollins College).³ Depictions of relationships between female classmates and teachers accompany those of relationships between mothers and daughters, which are a central focus in many of Smith's works. The mental illness of both of her parents, too, has given Smith a heightened interest in characters battling psychological instability.

While her father came from a long line of mountaineers, Smith's mother, Virginia, called "Gig," hailed from Virginia's coastal Eastern Shore. Gig taught home economics at the local school, and her studied femininity was both fascinating and challenging for her daughter. "Despite all my own inclinations" Smith writes in a 2011 article for *Garden & Gun*, "my mother kept at it, trying her best, raising me to be a lady" (Smith 84). Gig's attempts included trips from Grundy to visit her relatively refined family members, whom she hoped would be a good influence on her tomboy daughter. Despite Smith's resistance to Gig's "lady lessons," she credits Gig, too, with her development as a writer. "When I was little," she writes, "[Gig] read aloud to me constantly; I believe it is for this reason that I came to love reading so much, for I always heard her voice in my head as I read the words on the page" (Smith 26). Gig's perspective as a Grundy transplant also informed her daughter's. In a 1993 interview with Claudia Lowenstein, Smith recalls how her "mother was considered an outsider

³ Smith has become more and more deeply tied to Hollins since her graduation. That her attendance coincided with Louis Rubin's tenure there, as well as the enrollment of the writer Annie Dillard and the scholar Lucinda MacKethan, and Anne Goodwyn Jones, among others, has received notice as a significant moment in literary history. Very much is made of this academic environment in Nancy Parrish's 1998 book, *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers*.

though she lived in the mountain community for sixty years” (Lowenstein 109). Access to her mother’s perspective allowed Smith to see Grundy as both insider and outsider, as did her family’s relatively privileged social position.

For the purposes of this study, I have given Smith’s most resonant novels chapters of their own. *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *On Agate Hill* have achieved critical praise and relative popular success; they also deeply incorporate Smith’s most prevalent themes and stylistic motifs. Though the first and the last of these novels are separated in publication by more than twenty years, all are distinguished by their historical scope and expert use of voice. Smith’s other novels and stories have been grouped together chronologically, both because of convenience and because the clear evolution of Smith’s voice and focus is evident over time. In Smith’s works from 1968-1980, for instance, she focuses almost exclusively on young, female protagonists, aging them slightly from girlhood to young womanhood in her first four novels, respectively. By the 1980’s and 1990’s, however, Smith consistently was writing family or individual sagas that spanned generations, occasionally following women characters for the entirety of their lives.

Chapter two examines Smith’s earliest works of fiction, beginning with the publication of 1968’s *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* just after Smith graduated from Hollins College. It connects that novel with *Something in the Wind* (1971), *Fancy Strut* (1974) and *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980), works in which Smith plumbs the contradictions of mother-daughter relationships, identity, sexuality, and community for

girls and women in the contemporary South. Written mostly from the perspectives of young females characters, the novels are among Smith's most classifiably "Southern," as they deal more with issues of race and less with Appalachian traditions than do her later works. Read chronologically, these novels suggest Smith's growing frustration with roles and choices she perceived as available for young women, particularly in the upper-middle class South. By the time of *Black Mountain Breakdown's* 1980 publication, Smith had moved her protagonists from states of disillusionment tempered by vague hope to unhealthy resignation all the way to catatonia. Though the novels lack the formal inventiveness that would come to characterize Smith's work, they contain sections of strong narration, in which Smith successfully channels the first-person voices of her narrators.

The third chapter analyzes the publication and text of *Oral History*, which marked a turning point in Smith's career. The family saga was her first to include multiple first-person narrators, and to incorporate significant amounts of mountain history and folklore. It also was the first of Smith's novels to achieve major critical recognition. As Smith records the tumultuous history of the Cantrell family and their home at Hoot Owl Holler, she addresses the complexity of endeavors to record and/or define history. The chapter examines how Smith uses *Oral History's* formal structure to comment on "the past" as a theme. It also discusses her ruminations on myth and religion in the novel, and her attention to social and racial others. Mothers, in particular, are a central focus of *Oral History*, despite the infrequent use of their own narrative voices.

Chapter four centers upon the 1988 novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, in which Smith chronicles the post-adolescent life of Ivy Rowe, a prolific letter-writer whose life illustrates existence in the Virginia mountains. Ivy's impassioned missives and love of language provide windows to her identity, which develops over the course of her relatively long life. Much of Ivy's existence is spent at her childhood home on Sugar Fork; thus, geography and space also are key to an understanding of Ivy's personal subjectivity. The chapter also examines the tie that Smith presents in *Fair and Tender Ladies* between spirituality and sexuality; Smith expands, here, on the spiritual motifs that she began to plumb in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, *Oral History*, and even *Something in the Wind*.

Many works of Smith's self-described and ongoing "second career" are the focus of chapter five. With the exception of *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *On Agate Hill* (2006), the chapter examines Smith's publications that have occurred since her shift to writing about families, communities, and women living in the mountains. The first of these works, *Family Linen* (1985) centers on a family's response to a murder in their past, though the novel's action largely takes place in contemporary Virginia. *The Devil's Dream* (1992), the next novel addressed here, is an ambitious chronicle of the history of country music, told through the century-long history of the Bailey family. A family saga with formal similarities to *Oral History*, the novel brings Smith's interest in music to the forefront of her fiction for the first time. In *Saving Grace* (1996), Smith treats religion similarly as she narrates the story of a woman searching for religious fulfillment after a traumatic childhood at the hands of her wild, evangelist father. Another family is the focus of Smith's sentimental novella, 1996's *The Christmas Letters*.

Through three generations of women in the same family, Smith offers a slight but moving commentary on female interdependence and subjectivity. Smith's thematic inspirations are similar in *The Last Girls* (2001), which centers upon four college suitemates who reunite decades after graduation. Tasked with spreading the ashes of their enchanting but depressive friend, "Baby" Ballou, each woman grapples with her memories and current challenges.

The sixth and final chapter centers on *On Agate Hill*, a novel in which Smith combines familiar techniques from her writing career with a markedly different historical context. Published in 2006, *On Agate Hill* is the story of Molly Petree, a Civil War-era orphan who begins and ends her life on a crumbling North Carolina plantation. Though the novel includes sections set in Smith's familiar mountains, its physical and ideological context is the postbellum South. *On Agate Hill* also is the most formally ambitious novel Smith has written. She fictionalizes letters, diary entries, court records, and song lyrics for use as historical documents in the narrative, telling Molly's story through a multitude of different sources. In *On Agate Hill*, Smith also returns to familiar thematic territory, calling attention to largely untold stories, mother-daughter relationships, and the potential relationship of literacy to identity for young women.

While the cultural work Smith has undertaken in her novels and stories has undeniably been serious, it also is ultimately joyful. From her relatively pessimistic early works, Smith emerged to write fiction that is lively even as it is bittersweet. Her embrace of the tragedy, beauty, and humor of living culminates, for now, in the story of Molly Petree. "Oh Mary White," the *Agate Hill* heroine muses, on her deathbed, "don't you remember how we danced and danced as the storm came on, what did we know

then of lightning?" After a childhood spent among the ghosts of war, the death of her philandering but much-loved husband, and too many lost babies to bear, Molly embraces all that has been hers. "I am glad I gave all my heart...I would do it again," she writes (*On Agate Hill* 359).

“I don’t Know What I Can Do Yet”: Smith’s Early Fiction

The first decade of Lee Smith’s career as a published author was marked by measured critical praise and modest book sales. Her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968) was accepted for publication while Smith was still a student at Hollins. In a *Chicago Tribune* review, the influential Fanny Butcher wrote that the novel displayed Smith’s “real gift for writing” and “great potential as a novelist.” Butcher also noted, however, that she had “grave doubts” that *Dogbushes* would become “one of the classics of childhood” (Butcher). Though Smith closely followed her first publication with the novels *Something in the Wind* (1971) and *Fancy Strut* (1973), it was nearly ten years before she published another book. In part, the gap between publications was because Smith’s first three novels had not sold especially well. “All three books lost money for the company,” she recalls, “so when I wrote *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Harper & Row wouldn’t publish it” (Hill 25).

By the time Smith found Liz Darhansoff, a new agent who led her to the Putnam editor Faith Sale, she had “already applied to go back to school in special education at UNC and do something else entirely” (Hill 25). Smith also was not writing as much because of the new and different directions in which her family life and professional life were heading.⁴ After her 1967 marriage to the poet James Seay, Smith initially worked

as a writer for the *Tuscaloosa News* in Alabama, and then as an English teacher at Harpeth Hall School in Nashville; she gave birth to two sons in the meantime. “It’s hard to keep [writing] when no one’s publishing or taking it seriously,” Smith told Hill, “and meanwhile you’re neglecting your kids, or your house or whatever it is that you give up” (Hill, 25). Still, Smith did not altogether abandon writing. She won awards for some of her short fiction published during those years, such as the 1979 O. Henry Award for her story, “Mrs. Darcy Meets the Blue-Eyed Stranger at the Beach.”

Of Smith’s first four novels, three are centered on the lives of young women. *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, *Something in the Wind*, and *Black Mountain Breakdown* convey the stories of progressively older females struggling to define themselves in the face of stifling social norms and personal trauma.⁵ While the communities that Susan Tobey, Brooke Kincaid, and Crystal Spangler, respectively, inhabit are a significant presence in each novel, the young women are either first-person narrators of their stories or the tight focus of a third-person narrator. The outlier among Smith’s first four novels is *Fancy Strut*, a biting portrait of a small southern town that offers the third-person narratives of many characters. MacKethan has connected *Fancy Strut* with the other three novels by calling it a town’s coming-of-age story. “Underneath the ridicule

⁴ Smith has said that despite the necessary demands they made upon her time, her sons eventually improved her writing by exposing her to the world. “I think one thing that children do,” she told Irv Broughton, “is they shut you out of any tendency toward insularity that you might ever have because they expose you to whole other worlds and people and activities” (Broughton 83).

⁵ In *Dogbushes*, Susan Tobey is 9 years old when the action she describes occurs. Brooke of *Something* is 18 when her story begins, and around 21 when it concludes. *Breakdown*’s Crystal is 12 at the beginning of her narrative, and reaches her thirties by novel’s end. That Smith’s protagonists became progressively older suggests the semi-autobiographical nature of her earliest novels; Smith herself was aging as she wrote.

of pretense and pride,” she argues, “we catch a mood of elegy, striking here for the child the town once was” (MacKethan 6).⁶ It also is true that the narratives within *Fancy Strut* are concerned with the subjectivity of individual characters, even as the novel as a whole takes a wider view. The high school outcast Bevo Cartwright, for instance, spends his portion of the novel searching for a way to win the popular girl next door. Unable to conceive of a socially appropriate way to do it, he instead expresses his sexual frustration by setting fire to the high school football stadium. Like Susan Tobey and Brooke Kincaid, Bevo has difficulty operating within the social constraints that surround him, and struggles to find a satisfying alternative to them.

As Smith’s early protagonists form and explore their identities, they frequently act in response to their mothers, who loom large in Smith’s first novels. Though later works by Smith contain perspectives of mothers and daughters alike, she writes almost exclusively from the daughters’ perspectives in the works from *Dogbushes* to *Breakdown*. Susan Tobey and Brooke Kincaid both grapple with the overt sensuality of their mothers, while Crystal Spangler is herself sexualized by her mother Lorene, who enters her in beauty pageants and lives vicariously through her daughter’s hollow achievements. The mothers here are not identical, but each is a force with which Smith’s protagonists must come to terms in order to achieve a sense of selfhood. Over the course of *Dogbushes*, for instance, Susan stops being awed by her regal mother and begins to realize the complexity of her brave but also selfish affair; already more likely

⁶ MacKethan might disagree with my dismissal of communities as the central focus of the other three novels I discuss here. In the same essay, she also argues that “the small southern town...shifting and absorbing the weight of progress, hanging on with dear life both to idiosyncrasies and distinctions” is the defining feature of Smith’s earliest published writing.

to identify with neighborhood boys than with her ladylike female relatives, Susan allies herself with her father after her mother deserts the family. Smith's relationship with her own mother, Gig, informs stories like Susan's in her admittedly autobiographical early novels; Smith, too, grew up a tomboy in the home of a mother who privileged ladylike behavior. The female relationships in Smith's early novels laid the groundwork for her later, fuller, explorations of maternity and sexuality.

The young protagonists of Smith's first novels also grapple with their own sexuality, which they often encounter paired with violence. Susan and Crystal both are raped as young girls, while Brooke engages in consensual but frequently destructive sex. In *Fancy Strut*, Monica Neighbors begins an affair with a man she despises – she once refers to him as a “lousy little two-bit queer” – out of little more than boredom (*FS* 62). From Susan to Brooke and Monica, Smith's characters progressively exert more control in their sexual encounters. Control, while infinitely preferable to victimization, does not lead Brooke or Monica to fulfilling relationships. For Crystal, however, sexual control is not an option. Crystal's rape is a factor that leads to her loss of control in other areas of her life; it destabilizes her and reverberates despite her attempts to bury the event. The only significant sexual relationship that is successful in Smith's early novels is between two relatively minor characters, Ruthie and Ron, in *Fancy Strut*. In their ability to combine sex with conversation, they are a prototype for the fulfilling romantic relationships that appear more often in later works by Smith.

Sex and identity are tied up in Smith's early novels with community, which often is stifling rather than supportive for her young protagonists. Brooke, for instance, chafes against conventions of politeness among her family's friends and her sorority

friends at college. The communities in which Smith dwells in these novels mostly are composed of middle class white Southerners. African Americans characters are present on the periphery of these communities in some works – in *Something in the Wind*, they pack suitcases, carry luggage, and play music at frat parties – but central to their lives in others. In *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, Susan is fascinated by Elsie Mae, her family's maternal housekeeper, and by Frank, the Tobey's defiant handyman. Though Frank comes and goes, Elsie Mae is intimately entwined with Susan; she is almost always at the house, and she is the only person there who honestly considers Susan's many questions. Whether intimate or not, however, African American characters and white characters in Smith's early novels almost always are brought together through a financial exchange that awards white characters control of the relationship. Elsie Mae may be an essential source of support for Susan, but the Queen holds the power to sever their connection by dismissing Elsie anytime she pleases. The transactional nature of black and white relationships in Smith's early books underscores the artifice on which communities in these books often are constructed.

With inadequate parental guidance and deficient community support, Smith's young characters have little to aid them when they face trauma; at the end of Smith's first three novels, no protagonist seems positioned for a positive outcome. The difference in resolutions for characters in Smith's earlier and later novels has led many critics to label the early novels as pessimistic relative to the later ones. "At this point in her writing career," Cook wrote, "Smith...viewed the possibilities for female lives as extremely limited" (Cook 9). Hill puts it more specifically when she writes, "Smith's vision darkens until the implicit terminus is reached in *Black Mountain Breakdown*

when the protagonist succumbs to catatonia” (Hill, *Lee Smith*, 30). Smith has affirmed, to a degree, the suppositions of Cook and Hill in various interviews, but also suggests that as she matured, she felt more confident writing about phases of life besides young adulthood. “I think that there’s something to...the idea that as you get older what comes to interest you is *whole lives*” (Arnold 15). Smith began to practice writing about phases of life besides young womanhood in *Fancy Strut*, which presents the perspectives of characters besides Monica Neighbors. Mamaw, for instance, is Bevo’s free-spirited and confident grandmother, a woman who speaks her mind and pursues her interest. A “real card,” Mamaw “wore long, full dresses with lots of pockets and stayed outside all day long” (*FS* 47). She runs a thriving gardening business in her daughter’s backyard, and is quick to laugh at the relatively trivial troubles her grandchildren encounter. Although she is a relatively minor character, Mamaw illustrates Smith’s early ideas about positive possibilities for female characters.

Women such as Mamaw, rare in Smith’s early novels, are more common in her short fiction. Though most of Smith’s stories – many of which are collected in the 1981 collection *Cakewalk* – do not follow characters for decades of their lives, they do tell of middle-aged or older women who have found some of the contentment that eludes Smith’s young protagonists. Mrs. Joline B. Newhouse, for instance, a newspaper columnist in “Between the Lines,” is a middle-aged woman at relative peace with her place in life. Despite a cheating husband, troubled daughter, and her own past affair, Joline is filled with a kind of aching longing, rather than despair. “Now where will it all end?” she wonders at the close of her story, “All this pain and loving, mystery and loss” (*Cakewalk* 25). Her life has its share of pain, but Joline still is interested in seeing what

happens next. The same can be said of Mrs. Darcy, a widow in “Mrs. Darcy Meets the Blue-Eyed Stranger at the Beach” (1978). To the dismay of her daughters, Mrs. Darcy responds to the loss of her husband by trading dresses for old bathrobes and home-cooked meals for frozen pizza. Her daughters wonder whether she is depressed, but Mrs. Darcy soon experiences a vision that leaves her looking “ethereal” and “beatific” (*Cakewalk* 165). Though Mrs. Darcy’s seemingly supernatural peace comes from a different source than either Mamaw’s confidence or Joline’s longing, it sustains her, nonetheless.

Just as Smith was experimenting with ideas in her early works, she also was exploring formal possibilities. In *Dogbushes* and *Something in the Wind*, Smith convincingly writes in the first-person voices of her young narrators. In *Fancy Strut*, however, she attempted a narrative strategy that has come to characterize much of her oeuvre. Smith writes from the viewpoint of many different characters in that novel, presenting a polyvocal take on events in the town. Using a limited third-person voice for most sections, she presents individualized stories without actually writing in specific character’s voices. Smith does this again, to an extent, in *Black Mountain Breakdown*. While Crystal is the tight focus of the novel, Smith’s third-person narrator occasionally reveals the perspective of characters such as Crystal’s mother, Lorene, and best friend, Agnes. It wasn’t until Smith’s next novel, *Oral History*, that she combined first-person narration with the perspectives of multiple characters, channeling many voices to tell her story. Her formal experimentation is obvious in the tone of Smith’s earliest published fiction, too; *Fancy Strut*, particularly, shows how Smith was working to strike a balance between criticism of and empathy for some of her characters. Her critiques in

that novel are especially biting, so much so that Hill has called *Strut* “a cynical and disillusioned book,” that offers “a dark view of the human community” (Hill, *Lee Smith*, 35). Smith herself argues, however, that she sought to gently satirize “human foibles that you also have to love” (Hill, 23). Disagreement about the tone of Smith’s novel suggests the work she was doing to develop her own writerly voice.

IDENTITY

Though characters in much of Smith’s fiction are uncelebrated artists, her earliest protagonists are not primarily concerned with expressing themselves through art. Susan and Crystal, for instance, both dabble in poetry, but neither seriously pursues writing; they have vaguely artistic temperaments with little direction. The protagonists of Smith’s first four novels are young girls and women in search of ways to define themselves and express themselves authentically in relationships. As they pursue self-knowledge and understanding, Smith’s protagonists often find it difficult to reconcile their imaginative inner lives with the realities of the worlds around them. Ramos describes this difficulty by using a mirror, an image prominently featured in *Black Mountain Breakdown*. Susan, Brooke, and Crystal, she argues “try to discover whether they should define themselves through the cultural values of the looking glass or instead break the mirror of repetition to search for their true [identities] and [new] language with which to express [them]” (Ramos 43). Though Ramos does not extend her metaphor to *Fancy Strut*, it applies to parts of that novel, too; characters such as Monica Neighbors maintain public appearances that do not reflect their honest

thoughts and feelings. The conflict between interiority and exteriority that these early protagonists encounter frequently stops them from acting on their impulses; passivity becomes their default response to challenges.

Smith's protagonists often use comparison to their families or peers as a way to measure their identities. Susan, for instance, compares her appearance to her sister's as she considers what her role she might have in her "royal" family. Her feet, she thinks, "looked like boy feet when they were next to the Princess' princess feet in those shaky shoes.... Mine were brown and flat and looked like Robert's" (*Dogbushes* 39). Susan identifies herself with a neighborhood boy rather than the regal women of her family, and ultimately sees herself as a subject rather than a member of the Queen's court. Susan's lack of identification with her family leads her to seek closer companionship with her neighborhood friends, animals she watches at a pond, and Elsie Mae, the family's housekeeper. As she considers her identity in relation to that of each new companion, Susan reaches a striking conclusion about her integrated place in the world. "I prayed to the grass and to the flowers and to the rocks and to everything," she marvels, laughing. "...it was all the same.... It was all the same" (*Dogbushes* 179). Though Susan has not fully formed her identity at the end of summer, she has come to recognize the interconnectedness of the world she inhabits. Her new awareness of life and mortality – "everything was dying and...then I knew that I was too," she thinks – gives her a new lens through which she can continue to gain self-knowledge.

When Smith's early protagonists compare themselves to others, they frequently end up feeling as if their identities are fragmented. Smith repeats motifs of fragmentation in each of her first four novels, underscoring its centrality to her ideas

about the search for self-knowledge. While Susan “fixed [her] mind up so it was cut into boxes” to avoid thinking upsetting thoughts, Brooke is compelled by her comparisons to try and split herself in two (*Dogbushes* 173). “One half belonged to Brooke Kincaid, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. T. Royce Kincaid of River Bend, a recent graduate of St. Dominique’s School,” she explains. “The other half belonged to me. I was real, and the other half was only apparent” (*Something* 31). Monica, who is older than either Susan or Brooke, is less abstract in her thoughts about her split self. When her husband hands her a drink, she recalls, “she had smiled and thanked him and suddenly, unaccountably, she had felt like an imposter” (*Fancy Strut* 32). In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Crystal’s very name evokes her multi-faceted identity, which constantly changes depending on her company. As Cook puts it, “she must stand beside or opposite something to gain any substance at all” (Cook 47). Crystal, the last of Smith’s early protagonists, is the least integrated of all.

In these early novels, language is the primary signifier of Smith’s characters’ (in)abilities to express their authentic selves. Characters who cannot verbalize their thoughts generally feel disconnected from their families and communities, and question the validity of their developing identities. Brooke, for instance, looks to textual sources as varied as *Ripley’s Believe it or Not*, crossword puzzles, Victorian literature, and the Bible in an effort to find a discourse to adopt. Unsatisfied with all of them, she tells her boyfriend, “I’d like to make up a whole new language” (*Something* 181). Instead, Brooke continually varies her handwriting – “I was always interested to see how I would write,” she says – trying on new identities every time she lifts a pen (*Something* 201). Her seeming lack of control over which handwriting will appear on the page suggests the

degree to which Brooke ultimately feels clueless about which font truly is hers. Smith revisits the metaphor of handwriting for identity in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, in which Crystal, whose identity is even less stable than Brooke's, "can't fix upon a handwriting. She writes a different way each day" (*BMB* 48). Smith underscores the connection between literacy and identity through Brooke and Crystal, beginning an exploration that spans her career to date.

The critic Margaret Homans speaks to the universality of Brooke's struggles with language in her essay "'Her Very Own Howl': The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction." For women, Homans argues, "there is a specifically gender-based alienation from language that is characterized by the special ambiguity of women's simultaneous participation in and exclusion from a hegemonic group" (Homans 205). While Brooke is a white woman in the twentieth century South, and thus afforded greater hegemony than, for instance, her African American peers, she remains subject to patriarchal institutions – family, church, fraternity and sorority codes, to name a few – that influence her identity. In her attempts to negotiate this ambiguity, Brooke illustrates both "[women's] ambivalence concerning appropriation of the dominant discourse," and "their ambivalence about what alternatives to this discourse might exist" (Homans 191). As she writes about the likes of Brooke and Crystal, especially, Smith's perspective on the possibilities that both dominant and alternative discourses represent for young women is grim. However, Smith's own success in using language expressively as a woman – though less assured in her early works of fiction – provides a hopeful counterexample to the situations about which she writes. Smith is a writer who, as Homans puts it, "formally duplicate[s] the female

experience that [she] thematize[s], the experience of both participating in and standing outside the dominant culture (Homans 205).

Locklear has written more specifically about literacy's relationship to identity for young women in Appalachia. For Appalachian women in particular, she argues, "gaining new literacies never happens easily" because it "often results in the constant negotiation of self-identity." Locklear sites the "fear of 'getting above their raisings', a phrase characterized by alienation from family and home culture as a result of literacy attainment," as a primary challenge for Appalachian women acquiring literacy (Locklear 2). Though Smith's engagement with this problem is more noticeable in her later, Appalachian-set fiction, she sets the stage for that engagement in her early novels. Crystal, especially, is rebuked when she tries to gain self-knowledge by reading the diary of her ancestor, Emma Turlington Field. Crystal's husband, Roger Lee Combs, "takes the journal from her lap and closes it and puts it in the fire" (*BMB* 233). Crystal was not gaining much self-knowledge from the diary, but its removal is the catalyst that causes her to give up on knowing herself, entirely; John D. Kalb has gone so far as to call Roger Lee's action a "second rape" of Crystal, a violation by which he convinces her that she has nothing empowering on which to draw (Kalb 28). Shortly after Roger Lee burns the journal, "Crystal paralyzes herself. She just stops moving. She stops talking, stops doing everything" (*BMB* 237). Without a defined identity to guide her choices, Crystal becomes completely passive.

The passivity that Crystal so dramatically succumbs to is, to varying degrees, the end result of unsuccessful attempts at self-knowledge in Smith's first novels. The older Smith's early protagonists are, the more passive they are at the end of their narratives.

While Susan ends her summer resigned to the presence of evil in the world, Brooke comes “full circle” and can see vague “new directions” for her life by the close of *Something in the Wind* (*Something* 243). Monica, however, returns to her unfulfilling marriage after her affair in *Fancy Strut*, determined to have a baby because of her need for “something totally new” (*FS* 299). Susan and Brooke are optimistic despite being unresolved, but Monica’s seeming decisiveness is so shallow as to be comical. Crystal’s passivity is the most severe by design; when she began *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Smith “decided to write a book about this tendency that women, particularly Southern women in my generation, have to be passive” (Walsh 32). By making Crystal Spangler her representative of passivity, Smith roots that trait in race and class as well as geography. Crystal specifically is symbolic of white middle-class femininity,” which Beverley Skeggs has called “the ideal but also...the most passive and dependent” of twentieth century femininities (Skeggs 129). Though Crystal is not Lee Smith’s last passive character, she is her most extreme.

MATERNITY AND SEXUALITY

The mothers and daughters in Smith’s first four novels do not spend much time discussing sexuality with one another. When they do broach the topics, they usually obscure them in euphemisms and platitudes about acceptable standards of behavior. For the daughters, whose perspectives are central in these early works, these silences lead to discomfort with the idea of their mothers as sexual women and confusion about their own sexuality. The divided identities that Smith’s early protagonists sometimes

cultivate are reflected in their experiences with sex. While protagonists such as Brooke and Monica seek out sex, they also each seek to separate their minds from their bodies during intercourse, holding back from their partners even as they are physically intimate. Susan and Crystal attempt to maintain a similar split between their minds and bodies in sexual situations more traumatic; both experience rape at a young age. We cannot know the long-term effects of Susan's violation by Eugene, but Crystal's rape by her handicapped uncle, Devere, reverberates for decades of her life. Whether consensual or no, intercourse entails varying degrees of pain for the protagonists of Smith's early fiction.

When the mothers in these novels advise their daughters, it most frequently is on standards of ladylike behavior and appearance; they are ineffectual mentors when their daughters raise substantial questions. The Queen, for instance, deflects Susan's earnest inquiries about relationships by brushing them off and changing the subject to her daughter's often-unkempt appearance. When Susan overhears her mother admitting that she married Susan's father because she became pregnant, she tries to understand how that could happen. "Oh, *look* what you've done to the rug," the Queen responds, "Susan, go upstairs this minute and put on some dry clothes" (*Dogbushes* 109). The Queen also can be cruel instead of simply dismissive; when Susan worries about menstruation, she laughs at her and repeats Susan's concerns to a friend. As Cook writes, "Susan's first sexual knowledge, delivered to her by her mother, is coupled with misunderstanding and embarrassment" (Cook 21). Carolyn Kincaid, too, has little in the way of helpful advice for her confused daughter. "You ought to go out every weekend but you shouldn't go out two nights in a row with the same boy," she tells Brooke. "One

thing you have got to remember...is that boys don't like pale little egghead girls" (*Something* 33). Rather than giving her daughter useful information about sex and relationships, Carolyn only instructs Brooke on how to attract male attention. Though both the Queen and Carolyn are sources of comedy in their narratives, they are of little use when their daughters are in trouble.

A product of western Virginia, Crystal Spangler's mother, Lorene, is less concerned with ladylike behavior than the Queen or Carolyn. She also is less aloof than those mothers, and is a hands-on presence in Crystal's life. Still, her involvement consists of mostly kind but superficial care; Lorene fixates on Crystal's physical appearance and works to maintain her daughter's beauty. Her ineffectuality is illustrated when Crystal mourns a breakup. Lorene wants to find out what happened and advise her daughter. Instead, though, she "applies spray starch to the ruffle [on Crystal's dress] and it comes out perfect, and Lorene wishes that Crystal herself was this easy to straighten out" (*BMB* 113). A pragmatist, Lorene doesn't feel capable of engaging her dream, moody daughter; as Minrose Gwin puts it, she "takes what comes and doesn't ask hard questions" (Gwin 93). That Crystal's moodiness is a trait she shares with her father, Lorene's estranged husband Grant, only hampers Lorene's attempts to connect with her daughter. Her decades of frustration with Grant and, to a lesser extent, Crystal's older brothers, have stripped Lorene of confidence in her ability to understand her family members. Lorene's shallow involvement extends to Crystal's sex life. Though she monitors her comings and goings with boys – "I expect you home by twelve," she warns Crystal before leaves on a date – Lorene does not speak frankly

about love and relationships (*BMB* 95). Crystal has her mother's attention, but not her guidance.

Because their mothers are so consumed with staid appearances, Smith's protagonists sometimes are confused when their mothers are sexualized. They are not alone. As Marianne Hirsch has argued, although "nothing entangles women more firmly in their bodies than pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage, or the inability to conceive....the connection of maternity and sexuality remains a pervasive taboo in feminist analysis" (Hirsch 166). Susan offers the strongest embodiment of this taboo in Smith's work; when she discovers her father's sensual paintings of her mother, she is fascinated but also uncomfortable. The paintings make her feel like "sin in the Bible," and she especially is bothered by a portrait of the Queen with her mouth open and eyes rolled back (*Dogbushes* 70). "I knew it was awful but it was beautiful too," she thinks. "That messed me up" (*Dogbushes* 119). Susan complicated feelings about the paintings are foregrounded when, a few days earlier, she looks at book of nude portraits with her friends; "I wished I had that green book for my very own and then I was glad I didn't," she thinks (*Dogbushes* 97). Susan knows that the paintings of her mother are connected with the nude portraits, an association that makes her uneasy, but which she lacks information and vocabulary to understand.

Susan's confusion about her mother as a sexual figure is damaging, but it does help her imagine expanded possibilities for middle-class white women. As Smith said in an interview with Ramos, "Susan makes up the whole myth that her mother has been a Queen in order to put her mother up on...the mythic scale, where it is OK to be on a quest, which it is not in their own lives" (Ramos 70). The Queen refuses to play by the

rules of marriage, church, and other institutions, and Susan claims to feel lucky just to know such an unconventional woman. Through her resistance to convention, the Queen combats “the idea that motherhood and creative expression cannot coexist within the individual woman,” which Eckard calls a pervasive obstacle for female expression (Eckard 24). That the Queen’s bravery leads to Susan’s heartbreak creates a tension in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*. Female agency and maternity are in conflict, here. The Queen’s dilemma is central even as her voice is absent; she and her daughter each suffer as the Queen leaves a maternal role to which she feels ill suited.

If Smith’s early protagonists feel conflicted about their mothers’ sexualization, they are even more confused, and sometimes traumatized, by their own sexual experiences. Because of this confusion, Brooke and Monica try to separate physical intimacy from emotional or mental involvement. Brooke, for instance, thinks about her body in the third person when she kisses her deceased friend’s brother, John Howard. “Do what you will with Brooke’s body,” she thinks, “but please stay out of her mind” (*Something* 40). Monica, too, takes her self out of the action when she kisses Buck Fire, the actor with whom she pursues an affair. “Who,” she wonders as they fool around in an airplane, “was this strange sky girl, practically wetting her pants?” (*FS* 143). In large part, Brooke and Monica try to remove some essential part of themselves from their sexual experiences to absolve themselves of guilt. In Monica’s case, her guilt is attributable to her deceased mother. “Monica had learned...during her careful bringing-up,” she recalls, that “There are certain occupational types with whom nice girls don’t associate” (*FS* 62). Brooke’s guilt is less obvious, but tied up with her feelings about Charles, John Howard’s deceased brother and Brooke’s best friend. “I had never kissed

anybody before in my life,” she thinks as she makes out with John Howard, “not even Charles” (*Something* 39).

Brooke and Monica also act in response to social standards that they are resigned to uphold when they try to separate their thoughts from their sexual actions. The critic Kathryn Seidel has written about the sort of world each inhabits. “A society that prefers its lovely young women to be charming and flirtatious coquettes who never yield their purity,” she observes, “can create a situation of impossible tension for the belle: she is asked to exhibit herself as sexually desirable to the appropriate males, yet she must not herself respond sexually” (Seidel xvi). Smith illustrates this reality in her fiction when Monica repeatedly mentions her shame at having been promiscuous during a trip to Europe, and when Brooke dares to initiate sex with her fraternity boyfriend, Houston. Though he has no problem approaching Brooke for sex, he balks when she tries to pull him down in the snow, saying “Come on, come on, come on.” “What is the matter with you?” he asks. “What the hell is wrong?” (*Something* 99). Instead of appreciating Brooke’s desire for him, Houston pulls her back to the cabin, calling off their relationship soon after the incident.

Brooke has a healthier sexual relationship with her next boyfriend, Bentley, but is surprised to find that his ideas about women are not so different from Houston’s. While Bentley does not mind Brooke’s sexual assertiveness, he applies a different word – “whore – to promiscuous women than he does to men who frequently have sex. “Girls are different,” he says, “Guys can do what they want to” (*Something* 196). Their relationship begins to crumble the same night that Brooke questions his double standard; their apartment begins to shake, and Brooke sees “a gray shape” standing in

their doorway (*Something* 197). These disturbances reoccur in *Fancy Strut* with increasing violence, highlighting a connection between sex and danger that permeates Smith's first novels. Earlier in *Something in the Wind*, for instance, Brooke aims a shotgun at Bentley when he tells her he loves her; in *Fancy Strut*, Monica wishes her husband would "rip off her Tanner dress so violently that the buttons would sound like bullets as they hit the wall, and throw her down upon the floor" (*FS* 185). Brooke and Monica, respectively, create and desire violence in their sexual relationships.

For Susan and Crystal, sexual violence is a traumatic reality rather than something they seek. Their long-term responses to their rapes, though, resemble Brooke and Monica's responses to intercourse; each young girl tries to trick her mind into forgetting about her besieged body. Susan feels excruciatingly present in her body during her rape by Eugene – "the Iron Lung was hurting me between my legs," she says, "and the dirt was coming from all around to cover me...because I was dying" – but later tries to file the hurt away in an inaccessible compartment of her brain (*Dogbushes* 163). Crystal, too, feels intense pain when her uncle, Devere, rapes her. However, Smith represses the rape for readers as she does for Crystal; the novel reveals only the barest of details about the rape when it actually occurs in the narrative. "Devere comes and pushes her down on the cold dirt floor," the novel reads, "and the wrench drops at last from his hand. Later Crystal can never remember this or anything about it" (*BMB* 68). Aside from a few scattered mentions of Crystal having menstrual-like cramps and feeling ill, these lines are the most direct reference to her rape until much later in the novel, sixteen years later in Crystal's life. It is only when Crystal's memories of the event come rushing back that readers have a fuller, horrifying, window into what has

happened. The hurt, Crystal thinks, “seems to be traveling up her whole body into her shoulders and then pinpointing itself somewhere up at the very top of her head” (*BMB* 229).

The narrator’s and Crystal’s initial silences about Crystal’s rape initially make it hard to discern the effects of sexual violence on her life. As Gwin has argued, “the reader must create a story out of Crystal’s silence” (Gwin 91). Crystal’s family is silent, too, in response to her rape, because no one ever realizes that it happens. In Susan’s case, however, adults do not adequately address her rape despite her insistence, in the only vocabulary she has to describe it, that it occurred. “‘Aren’t you going to do anything to me?’” she asks the parents of her friends. “‘I hurt down there. What about that?’” Susan is persistent, continuing to seek recognition when her friend’s mother answers with a pat and throwaway assertion that all will be well. “‘It’s not all right,’” she says. “‘What’re you going to do?’” In response to her persistence, Susan’s community firmly demands her silence. “‘Hush, Susan,’ they said. ‘It’s all right’” (*Dogbushes* 170). Even rape does not change Susan’s community’s habit of brushing off her attempts to gain knowledge. The silencing of Crystal and Susan underscores the extent to which language and speech impact their developing subjectivities. If the idea of discourse as a signifier of identity seems abstract, here, Susan and Crystal’s inability to communicate with adults in their communities are tragically concrete.

The one adult who does communicate extensively with Crystal about matters besides her appearance is Grant Spangler, her alcoholic, couch-ridden father. Grant is able to tap into Crystal’s love of stories and language in a way that no one else she knows can; she spends hours by his side as he reads poetry and recites fables for her in

the darkened parlor he occupies. As Caren J. Town notes, Crystal's father provides her with a "link to literature [and] the past" (Town 31). However, Grant's physical similarity to Devere, as well as the pleasure he takes in Crystal's frightened responses to his stories, lends a disturbing subtext to their father-daughter interactions. Minrose Gwin outlines the "obvious erotic implications" to a scene where Grant reads Crystal "The Spider and the Fly" – "the seductive story, the father's seductive reading, the daughter's fear and pleasure..." (Gwin 91). When Grant dies, Crystal is the one who finds him; he expires the day after her rape by Devere. The timing of these two tragedies inextricably ties Crystal's positive memories of her father to her violation by her uncle, though Crystal does not consciously recognize the link. Her memory goes silent along with Grant's storytelling voice.

While each of the main characters in Smith's early novels has a damaging and violent exposure to intercourse, peripheral characters fare better, offering alternatives to the bleak experiences of Smith's protagonists. *Fancy Strut* offers the greatest concentration of these, as it is told from the third-person limited perspective of many residents of Speed. Sandy and Sharon Dubois, for instance, a mother and daughter in that novel, are both comfortable sexually asserting themselves. Sharon masturbates in her mirror, directly contradicting the self-effacing power of mirrors in the lives of Smith's early protagonists. Sandy, Sharon's mother, is even more transgressive. "Sandy's wild laughter," Cook argues, "sets her apart from other women as she disrupts the status quo in her extramarital affair" (Cook 40). The confident, self-assured quartet of Sandy, Sharon, Ruthie, and Mamaw, all of whom live on the same block, offer a striking contrast to Monica and her lack of self-knowledge and sexual fulfillment. In

Smith's later fiction, women who own their sexual desires will be the protagonists of their own stories. Throughout her first four novels, though, they are relegated to experimental subplots.

COMMUNITIES

As the protagonists of Smith's first four novels try to establish their identities, they necessarily respond to the communities that surround them. They most commonly react against the norms of these communities, positioning themselves as outsiders in a world of artifice. Composed mostly of middle-class white Southerners, towns such as Speed, Alabama, the setting of *Fancy Strut*, are also home to small numbers of African American characters, many of whom work in the homes of white families. Smith's fictionalization of the relationships between her white, female protagonists and the African American workers whom they encounter is unique in her career. While no African American character narrates a section of these early novels, several have significant dialogue; in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, for instance, Elsie Mae speaks nearly as much as the Queen. Still, this dialogue always is filtered through white narrators, who occasionally position themselves against their families or communities on issues of race. Brooke and her brother, Carter, reject their mother's casual racism, while Lloyd Warner of *Fancy Strut* enjoys legally representing African American students in his town against his rival, the town mayor. *Black Mountain Breakdown*, however, features no intimate interaction between African American and white characters. The novel is typical of Smith's Appalachian-set fiction in its lack of racial diversity.

When the mothers in Smith's early fiction compel their daughters to behave in ladylike ways, it often is because they fear community censure. Though Crystal's mother is less concerned with decorum than the Queen or Carolyn, she still worries about what her peers think of Crystal's behavior. When Crystal breaks up with her high school boyfriend Roger Lee, for instance, Lorene angrily lectures her: "I don't understand how you can just up and do something like that!" What Lorene thinks, but doesn't say to Crystal, is that her daughter's actions will have a ripple effect within their small community. "Lorene also can't figure out," the narrator reveals, "how she can ever face Roger's mother again if she happens to run into her in the Piggly Wiggly or on the street" (*BMB* 86). Brooke notices her older sister, Liz, entertaining similar concerns at her friend Charles's funeral. When Brooke asks questions during a hymn, Liz angrily tells her to "shut up and sing." "If I had been one of her kids," Brooke thinks, "she would have smacked my hand" (*Something* 16). Liz's anger is roused because Brooke is not blending in to the community of churchgoers. The incredulity and anger that communities express when a young woman does not fulfill her prescribed role are frequently reenacted in Smith's early novels.

When Susan and her ilk reject standards of the ladylike roles their communities expect them to fill, it is often because they find those roles inauthentic. Brooke, especially, positions her "real" self in opposition to the falseness she perceives in her communities. At Charles's wake, she is aghast at the normal conversations people carry on near his coffin. "The other people in the kitchen talked softly about everything under the sun: the governor, crops, their children, the new Episcopal priest, a divorce," she observes. "How can they do this with Charles in the next room?" (*Something* 11). Lloyd

Warner, a lawyer in *Fancy Strut*, provides a male perspective on the artifice of ladylike roles when he thinks about his mother. "She had played the grande dame all her life," he muses. "Nothing so preposterous as her husband's suicide was going to strip her of her role (*FS* 233). The friction generated by characters in search of authentic selves brushing up against communities that demand conformity sometimes leads to violent confrontation. Lloyd illustrates this best when he shoots himself during a mock-Civil War battle staged at Speed's Sesquicentennial. He defies the pageant's artifice by creating a real wound, with real blood, and the pageant soon descends into chaos.

As Lloyd's Civil War scene suggests, Smith's protagonists often see propriety as a particularly Southern demand. When Brooke awkwardly rejects an advance by John Howard, for instance, she thinks: "Sometimes I thought that Brooke wasn't really Southern after all. I knew what she would have done if she was Southern. She would have slapped John Howard's hand...and laughed a lot, and then she would have gone to rush" (*Something* 41). For Brooke, being Southern means maintaining charming femininity at all times; it means following in the footsteps of her "gay young thing" mother, Carolyn, and imitating her sorority-girl college roommate, Diana (*Something* 31). Lloyd feels unwillingly connected to the Southern past, too. After years in New York, Lloyd can't quite understand his decision to return to Speed, his hometown. "Only a fool would come back to Speed," he thinks. "He felt at home here, that was all. Faulkner shit" (*FS* 121). Engaged in a strange dance of attraction and repulsion with his community, Lloyd wears seersucker and plays the eccentric alcoholic even as he hates himself for doing it. His visits to his mother epitomize his conflict. Something unidentifiable, he thinks, "kept him walking over [to her house] every day of his life and

hating every minute of it" (*FS* 234). Like Brooke, who tries to fit into her middle-class white community even as she resents it, Lloyd is compulsively a part of his town.

Susan admires the resistance to her community's norms that is offered up by Frank, her family's African American handyman. When Frank manages to get hired without saying anything more than his first name to the Queen, Susan's mother is angry. "Frank had fixed her good," Susan thinks, and she files the incident away in her mind (*Dogbushes* 31). Later, she watches, fascinated, as Frank shocks her parents by mowing the same patch of lawn over and over again, drunk and singing hymns. "All those years I had thought Frank was the gardener in the palace of the Queen," she thinks, "but he was not that at all. He was something else" (*Dogbushes* 53). Susan begins to understand Frank's existence outside the laws of decorum when he commits fraud to receive aid from the government, a "bigger thing than anything [Susan] knew of except God. But Frank cheated it...I thought he was really brave" (*Dogbushes* 136). Frank's small acts of defiance and independence are inspiring to Susan, who is just beginning to think of ways she can assert her own identity. When Frank suddenly dies, she feels disillusioned and begins to recognize her own mortality. Still, Susan finds even his death to be bold. "He didn't have the right to die but he had done it...that hard green light of dying blew up in me like a flashbulb" (*Dogbushes* 177). Though she never speaks to him, Susan is attracted by Frank's otherness and defiance.

Frank's willfulness threatens the Queen so much because her lifestyle is supported by his compliant labor. The white female identities that are so central in Smith's early novels are partially defined, too, by their dependence on the work of African American women. To be the Queen, for instance, Susan's mother needs servants

to perform the household labors that she does not. As Baym writes, “The Southern belle is a princess, idle and free; the Southern matron a queen, always busy, to be sure, but busy with gracious ceremony and elegant appearances” (Baym 193). Monica, likewise, is free to attend bridge club parties and chair the “Sesquicentennial Headquarters Committee” because Suetta, her family’s African American housekeeper, is vacuuming the rugs – whether Monica likes it or not. “It was unthinkable to Manly that his wife should not have a maid,” the narrator explains. “It was a matter of life style” (FS 28). When Monica decides to change her life at the end of *Fancy Strut*, it is significant that dismissing Suetta is the biggest change she makes. Desperate for something, anything, to do, Monica must first be in control of her own home, which entails ending the expectation that someone else will clean it for her.

Smith underscores the discomfort of both the Queen and Monica with their domestic help by describing their reliance on money as a means of control. When Frank drunkenly mows the lawn, for instance, Susan’s father unsuccessfully tries to talk him into leaving the Tobey’s property. It is only when Mr. Tobey gives Frank a dollar that he goes, though he sings as loudly as possible as he departs. In a way, Frank has manipulated Mr. Tobey just as he does the government; by making his employers uncomfortable – easily done, he knows – Frank gets paid without having to do his work. Monica, likewise, offers Suetta severance pay when the maid shows reluctance to leave the job she has held for decades. “I’ll pay you for two weeks, of course,” she says, “until you find another job.” Monica believes that she can dismiss Suetta by stopping her pay after two weeks, but Suetta feels a more personal connection to her work. “I’ll be talking to Mr. Manly,” she says before she leaves, thus challenging Monica’s ability to

fire her (*FS* 298). Smith never places the reader in Suetta's thoughts, but it seems she views her place in the Neighbors' home as dependent on factors besides financial transactions.

In *Dogbushes*, the household labors that the Queen passes on to Elsie Mae include caring for Susan, which likewise complicates the housekeeper's relationship to the family. Elsie Mae gives Susan physical sustenance by preparing her meals and washing her clothes, but she also the only person in Susan's household who tries to answer her earnest questions and tell her truthful stories. Entzminger points to Elsie Mae's stories as especially crucial for Susan's development. "The black character remains a shadow figure in the works of recent [southern] women writers," she notes, "but...the figure mothers the young writers' repressed creativity struggling to emerge" (Entzminger 160). Susan recognizes and appreciates Elsie Mae's wit. "I was the only one in the castle who knew how smart Elsie Mae was," Susan thinks, recalling an incident in which the Queen made fun of Elsie Mae in front of party guests (*Dogbushes* 111). Susan's recollection binds her to her caretaker; she, too, has been made the object of the Queen's jokes, and is smarter than she is given credit for. The young girl's attachment to Elsie Mae is noticeable enough that Susan's older sister, Betty, attempts to disrupt it. Inventing an excuse to get Susan out of the kitchen, Betty says, "it's not a good idea to spend so much time with the help" (*Dogbushes* 117).

What is less clear in *Dogbushes* is the extent of Elsie Mae's attachment to Susan. Entzminger has singled her out as "the traditional southern mammy," and "the opposite of the jezebel [Queen]," which seems fair given the kisses, laughs, and comfort that fill her interactions with Susan (Entzminger 159). However, Donlon cautions readers

against assuming too much about a relationship that remains dependent on the financial transactions of others. “In White Southern fiction,” she notes, “the Black teller is frequently sentimentalized as an ‘intimate’ part of the family – an image rooted in White plantation fiction where the ‘Good Slave’ cheerfully entertains White children by the hour” (Donlon 20). By fictionalizing relationships between African American domestic workers and the white families they serve, Smith participates in a long-standing Southern literary tradition. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1928), Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* (1946), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988), to name only a few of many novels, examine relationships like Susan’s and Elsie Mae’s.

Smith moves her depictions of race relations from the domestic sphere into the legal one with *Fancy Strut*, which features a racial discrimination lawsuit as well as a small-scale race riot. In that novel, though, her gentle examination is replaced by focused satire that does not spare African American or white characters. While Monica and Suetta stare one another down in the Neighbors’ home, Lloyd Warner helps local African American college students mount a lawsuit against an apartment complex that refuses to rent to one of them. The suit is just and exposes some of the behavior on which Speed’s white establishment is built, but Smith refuses to make martyrs of the young men bringing the suit. According to the relatively reliable narration of Lloyd Warner, Chall is entitled and not especially bright; Theolester, who puts his friend up to the lawsuit, is opportunistic and trying too hard to embody an activist role. Smith ties together past and present by including a mock-Civil War battle in Speed’s pageant.

When Lloyd actually is shot during the display, Theolester incites a riot downtown; he assumes Lloyd has been targeted because of the legal action he is undertaking on behalf of the black students. That Lloyd is responsible for his own wound makes the riot uncomfortably comic – Theolester has cause to revolt against injustice in Speed, but the impetuous for his boldest action is faulty.

After her direct engagement with challenges to Jim Crow policies in *Fancy Strut*, however, Smith began her foray into Appalachian-set fiction and began to feature fewer African American characters. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Crystal's small mountain community is so racially homogenous that the narrator never mentions African Americans until Crystal leaves it. Visiting Richmond for a beauty pageant, Crystal thinks how "Negroes fascinate her; there are no Negroes in Black Rock and there's no reason for them to move their either, Lorene has always said. Nothing to do except work in the mines" (*BMB* 136). Though Crystal and her mother do not live in close proximity to African Americans, they nonetheless have absorbed cultural ideas about how they should behave around persons of color. "Before they leave the [hotel] room," the narrator relates, "Lorene puts her money into her bra so that it wont be stolen by Negroes" (*BMB* 137). Asides such as this comprise most mentions of African Americans in Smith's fiction from *Black Mountain Breakdown* to *On Agate Hill* (2006), published over twenty years later. As Donlon has argued, Smith "lead[s] her readers into a distinctive racial and cultural community;" like the Grundy of her youth, Smith's Appalachia is largely inhabited by white characters (Donlon 29).

Smith's turn to Appalachian communities in *Black Mountain Breakdown* marked a major shift in her career. For her protagonists, this turn includes an opportunity to

access more supportive communities. In Smith's later novels, female characters often find positive identification with their communities, rather than pressure to conform. As Katherine Kearns puts it, "Smith's hard-won knowledge" from her early fiction "is channeled into figures of matriarchal power" (Kearns 176). Grace Shepherd of *Saving Grace* (1995), for instance, feels grounded in her mother's loving and generous variety of Christianity, and finds comfort in practicing her mother's traditions. Linda Wagner-Martin argues that nourishing communities of women have been a "constant in a hundred years of the Southern novel by women," noting how female characters "have been – and still are – drawing much of their sustenance and their wisdom from a female line of ancestry, and thereby creating a true community of women" (Wagner-Martin 32). Smith, though, had to move her fiction to Appalachia in order to envision that sort of community. Though Smith's early protagonists desire but do not find communities of supportive women they pave the way for the women who follow them in Smith's oeuvre.

“A Chain of Her Own Choosing Or Dreaming”: *Oral History*

While Lee Smith attempted to publish *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980)– it took, by her reckoning, about eight years – she was raising two sons and writing mostly short stories. She published fourteen of them in her 1981 collection, *Cakewalk*, which features contemporary characters living in the rural South. With stories set in places like Gulfport, Mississippi, and on the beaches of the Carolinas, *Cakewalk* has little that is uniquely Appalachian within its pages, putting it in stark contrast to the novels that Smith would publish later in the decade. *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985), and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) are all firmly grounded in the history and the manners of Smith’s mountain homeland, a territory she was just beginning to feel she could re-create in her fiction.

The first of those novels, 1983’s *Oral History*, began as a similarly titled short story. Set in the mountains of western Virginia, the story centered on a young woman who ventures into a holler to record the stories of her estranged relatives. After publishing “Oral History” in *The Carolina Quarterly*, Smith “decided to write the novel filling in what would be on the [recording],” adding the textured voices of dead and living characters from Hoot Owl Holler (Arnold 10). The resulting novel, her first major commercial and critical success, established Smith’s literary tie to the Appalachian present and the folklore of the region’s past. While *Oral History* revisits themes familiar

from Smith's first four novels – sexuality, motherhood, and young women's searches for identity, to name a few – the novel's dramatically different spatial setting freed Smith to approach those themes from a new angle. Women still struggle to establish identities and resist patriarchal community structures in *Oral History*, but for the first time in Smith's fiction, some female protagonists find ways to live authentic, powerful, and sexually fulfilled lives.

Oral History opens with the story of Jennifer, a suburban college student completing an oral history project for a course. Visiting her late mother's family for the first time she can remember, Jennifer writes her "Impressions" of them for her project. She also places a tape recorder in the family's ancestral home, which is supposedly haunted by spirits from the Cantrell's tumultuous past. Though Jennifer's writing is affected and not terribly insightful, the voices her tape recorder collects are engaging and illuminating. Beginning with the voice of the community healer, Granny Younger, these voices fill most of Smith's novel, relating three generations of Jennifer's family history.

The first Cantrell about whom the voices speak much is Almarine, a handsome man whose romances end disastrously. After taking up with Red Emmy, an older woman reputed to be a witch, Almarine casts her out of his home when she becomes pregnant. His dismissal of Emmy sets in motion a supposed curse which plagues the family for generations: Almarine's young wife, Pricey Jane, and young son both die from drinking bad milk; his daughter, Dory, commits suicide after a heartbreaking life; and his granddaughter, Pearl, dies in childbirth after an affair with one of her high school students. These events are related by speakers from both inside and outside the family,

by characters who reside in the hollers and by “foreigners” with little knowledge of mountain life. In all, thirteen voices combine to reveal the Cantrells’ story.

The novel’s polyvocal structure creates an aura of myth about the characters’ stories, which is reinforced by the subject matter they address. Because so many speakers provide their impression of the Cantrell’s history, the novel itself never offers an authoritative version of the past. Instead, readers must sift through and evaluate the evidence characters offer in pursuit of the “true” story, which remains elusive. Rosalind Reilly has written about the recurring motif of the circle in *Oral History*, arguing that the novel is founded on a “circular structure...mirrored in microcosm throughout the book” (Reilly 82). Just as the novel begins and ends with the present day story of Jennifer and her relatives, the voices within the novel tell stories that circle back on one another, creating patterns of both hope and destruction.

For a novel so infused with superstition and mystery, *Oral History* also is markedly grounded, as it grapples with motherhood and the roles of other female caretakers. Granny Younger, for instance, describes Red Emmy as a witch who possesses Almarine, but another story emerges between the lines of what Granny actually says. Emmy works hard on the farm during Almarine’s illness, yet the reward for her work is banishment by Almarine, who sends her away while she is pregnant with his child. Granny and the men at the local store consider his behavior necessary, but the fact remains that Emmy has been treated horribly. *Oral History* is intriguing because it simultaneously relies on superstition and mystery as sources of entertainment and yet exposes those elements as tools of oppression. Mothers are the narrative “others” in this novel, particularly when they also are women of color. For

every cursed pair of earrings or eerie whistle of the wind in the novel, there is a character like Emmy, or Almarine's unattractive and overlooked stepdaughter, Ora Mae, "working [her] knuckles straight down to the bone" (*OH* 208).

Oral History drew critical praise from highbrow publications as well as widely popular ones. In *People* magazine, for instance, the novel was chosen as a "Pick," and called a "delightful and entertaining novel" ("Picks"). The *Village Voice* was even more effusive in its review: "You could employ all those familiar ringing terms of praise: 'rare,' 'brilliant,' 'unforgettable. But Lee Smith and *Oral History* make you wish all those phrases were fresh and new, that all those comparisons had never before been made. For this is a novel deserving of unique praise" ("Lee's"). The positive reception of *Oral History* led to its selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Lee Smith's emergence as a major writer.

With the acclaim came comparisons to other authors, and Bradley made especially weighty ones. "You could make comparisons to Faulkner and Carson McCullers," he wrote, "to *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Wuthering Heights*" (Bradley). H.H. Campbell, writing in the *Southern Literary Journal*, also emphasized Smith's connection to the Brontë sisters, citing similarities in the details and structures of the writers' novels. Campbell gives special attention to parallels between *Oral History* and *Wuthering Heights*. Several of the names in *Oral History* recall characters from Brontë's novel, and both novels feature chronological structures that move from the present into the past and back again. Thematically, Campbell argues, each novel centers upon a woman "caught between an unsatisfying reality (including an unhappy marriage) on the one hand and her strong, unfulfilled dreams and desires on

the other” (Campbell 146). Comparisons such as these “astounded” Smith, who has modestly called Bradley’s comparison between herself and Faulkner “ridiculous” (Arnold 1).

In many ways, *Oral History* marked a change in the sort of writing Smith would continue to publish. With the exception of *Fancy Strut* (1973), none of her previous novels had featured the first-person narratives of many different characters. Her work had also never been set in the Appalachian past, where it could be saturated with folk stories and historical resonance. However, in the works that follow *Oral History*, Smith frequently wrote about Appalachia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, visiting the past in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), *The Devil’s Dream* (1993), and *On Agate Hill* (2006). The latter two of those novels also employ multiple narrators, and all include perspectives on Appalachia from its residents as well as outsiders.

Just three years after its 1983 publication, *Oral History* made its theater debut as the play *Earrings*. Adapted from Smith’s novel by Don Baker, *Earrings* split the Cantrell family’s story into three acts along generational lines. Almarine, Dory, and Pearl and Sally each anchored an act of the play, which has been staged as recently as July of 2012. Writing in a 1988 issue of *Theatre Journal*, William W. French praised the production’s “flow of language and sensibility,” achieved through the use of folk music interwoven with the actors’ voices (French 421). French also noted that the play’s casting added a layer of symbolism to Smith’s material. The same actress portrayed Pricey Jane, Dory, and Pearl in the 1988 staging, while the same actor took on the outsider roles of Richard Burlage and Parrot Blankenship, thus suggesting similarities among the characters themselves.

Oral History was also adapted by the magazine *Redbook*, which printed a condensed version of the novel, before its publication, as “The Mystery in the Hills.” “It was *terrible*,” Smith confessed to Edwin Arnold, “to have [each character] to come and just speak for three sentences” (Arnold 16). The *Redbook* version also played up the “Gothic Appalachian” aspect of *Oral History* in an attempt to appeal to what Smith calls the “serious middlebrow” readership. The novel was Smith’s third to be adapted by *Redbook*, which paid well for its rights and exposed Smith to its broad audience.

STRUCTURE AND THE PAST

At the time of its publication, *Oral History* was the most intricately structured novel Smith had written. The book employs a frame narrative, which allows Smith to move the story from the present into the distant past and back again. Within this arrangement, several smaller-scale structural choices are also significant. The portion of the story that is set in the past, for instance, is recorded both “orally” and in written form. While Granny Younger’s voice is presented as captured on Jennifer’s tape, the story from Richard Burlage’s point of view is taken from his memoirs, which the novel says were published by a university press. The difference between these sources could hardly be more striking. A typical Granny Younger line reads: “I been here a long time. Years. I know what I know. I know moren most folks and that’s a fact” (*OH* 27). Richard, pretentious and dreamy, writes in a more formal, self-conscious style: “I am torn asunder by conflicting thoughts, each one as valid, it seems to me, as its opposite. I am a

sinner, bound for hell; I am a saint, purified by love; I am only a fool" (*OH* 166). Thus, Smith uses multiple, diverse fictional sources to convey the Cantrell family's narrative.

Another structural strategy, exemplified by the juxtaposition of Granny's story with that of Burlage, is Smith's use of characters who are insiders and outsiders, respectively, in the mountain community surrounding Hoot Owl Holler. While Richard spends only five months in Black Rock, Granny Younger lives there for her whole life. Richard's story, too, travels beyond the Virginia mountains to academics as far away as Louisiana. Granny's story, presumably, remains untold to most listeners even after Jennifer records it. Most characters fall neatly into either the insider or outsider category; only a few characters divide their lives between Hoot Owl and other locations. By delivering the story from persons and sources in both the novel's past and its present, Smith creates a fluid historical narrative in which truth is elusive as well as complex.

Oral History opens with the italicized words of a third-person narrator who has access to some of Jennifer and her estranged grandmother, Ora Mae's, thoughts. The voice tells how Jennifer, too easily, classifies her mountain relatives as "so sweet, so simple, so kind," and how Ora Mae finds Jennifer much "like her mother Pearl," a restless woman who left her husband and daughter to embark on a relationship with one of her high school students (*OH* 16,20). The voice is also privy to the overwritten notes that Jennifer takes as she interacts with her family, and it breaks from italics to reproduce two pages of them. Jennifer writes that her professor, Dr. Bernie Ripman, "wanted [her] to expand [her] consciousness, [her] tolerance, [her] depth," and wonders how she could "repay him for the new frontiers of self-knowledge [she has]

crossed" (*OH* 19). The pretension with which Jennifer writes suggests that she is allowing preconceptions and unexamined personal goals to cloud her objectivity when it comes to observing her family. Jennifer "sees in the mountain people exactly what her professor has encouraged her to see," critic Suzanne W. Jones has written, and "to adjust for complexity, she simply omits from her report what does not fit her expectations" (Jones 103).

Jennifer writes, for instance, about her "new appreciation for these colorful, interesting folk. My *roots*," but doesn't mention that, "close up," her grandfather Luther "smells terrible: body odor, tobacco, something else" (*OH* 18, 282). Jennifer's assessment of Little Luther shows that she cannot reliably describe or interpret her living family members, a weakness which suggests that her attempts to delve into her family's past will be even less successful. Because of her comparative blindness, it is important that Smith follows Jennifer's sections with sections in the voices of such characters as Granny Younger, Jink Cantrell, and even Luther. The novel's middle sections, Jones argues, operate as a "corrective" to Jennifer's narrative, giving readers access to stories that Jennifer and her contemporaries would gloss over. As Jones puts it, Jennifer "does not understand how oral history works to relate individuals to a group nor does she see it as the dynamic process that it is – a complex relationship between teller and listener, between events and transmission of events" (Jones 104). The transcribed voices of Jennifer's mountain family provide a purer look at this process, drawn as they are from unabridged voices.

However, as Locklear argues, it is only Smith's actual reading audience that is privy to those transcribed voices. The "fictional reading audience," a group that

Locklear singles out, is a group with access to Jennifer's version of her family's history and, presumably, no knowledge of her ancestors' first-person accounts (Locklear 177). The reading public within the space of the novel also has access to Richard Burlage's memoir, which was published, in the fictional audiences' world, by Louisiana State University Press. By limiting the documents and stories to which her fictional audience has access, Smith makes a clear statement about the ways that we, her real audience, consume and distort historical information. "Ultimately," Locklear posits, "Smith creates Oral History...as [a counternarrative] that rhetorically work to reshape her reading audience's perceptions of Appalachia, Appalachian women, and literacy" (Locklear 177). Specifically, the voices of Granny Younger, Jink Cantrell, and Sally provide a counternarrative to the written histories of Jennifer and Richard Burlage, undermining their cultural authority. Still, the novel begins and ends with the words of Jennifer and the nameless narrator closely associated with her. By placing conventional sources of historical information in a bookend position, Smith both questions their authenticity through juxtaposition and provides, as Locklear puts it, "a rhetorical statement about how academic versions of Appalachia always seem to have the first and last word when chronicling the region for readers" (Locklear 178).

This is not to say that Smith believes, simply by virtue of being first-person and from the past, a voice should be accepted as correct, authentic, or even honest. In fact, in a 1984 interview, Smith expressed doubt that the true history of a person or place could ever really be grasped. "[No] matter how much you do and how much you record people and so on, you never really know exactly the way it was...it is always the teller's tale, that no matter who's telling the story, it is always the teller's tale, and you never

finally know exactly the way it was” (Arnold 6). But the transcribed vernacular stories in *Oral History* do have a better claim to authenticity, if not veracity, than do the written ones intended for public dissemination, if only because they are offered by the people living in Appalachia, rather than by outsiders trying to understand mountain life. The stories and discourse have deep regional ties, the value of which outweighs any bias they may contain. This insider-outsider dynamic is one of the most effective that Smith develops in her fiction, and also one of the most resonant.

Granny Younger, the first insider to speak in the novel, tells the reader about Almarine’s relationships with Red Emmy and Pricey Jane. Granny is disarmingly charming and plain spoken, and her unpretentious mannerisms are convincing, especially because she speaks just after Jennifer. As Hovis puts it, “Smith places the reader in the position of insider, inviting us – through the charismatic Granny Younger – to suspend our political judgments and cultural biases, as if we too had been reared in the isolation of those mountains (Hovis 156). Donlon further clarifies Granny’s treatment of the reader, writing, ““Granny Younger’s use of allusive frames has served to establish us as already a part of the community by the time we realize our position. We are, in effect, what W. Daniel Wilson has termed a ‘characterized reader,’ one who is embodied in the text and directly addressed by it” (Donlon 29). Just a few pages into Granny Younger’s section of *Oral History*, we have moved from outsiders guided by Jennifer and a voice we don’t recognize to part of the mountain community, drawn in by a woman who is both a talker and a healer.

Though Smith makes it easy to align with Granny Younger, critics have pointed out some of the dangers in doing so. One problem, as Eckard notes, is that Granny

Younger is so closely tied to her community that it is problematic to expect her to be objective about it. She writes, "Granny Younger represents the community point of view, and she is the repository of the spiritual life and the collective history of the community" (Eckard 123). Though this representation is positive in many ways, it also raises questions about the accuracy of Granny Younger's narrative, questions only heightened by Granny's frequent condemnation of Red Emmy. Cook rightly argues that "even though she is a woman, [Granny Younger] colludes with the patriarchy in her judgment and condemnation of Red Emmy" (Cook 121). Entzminger echoes this sentiment when she writes about Granny Younger's unusual degree of autonomy at Hoot Owl, noting the way "the healer has power in the community, but mainly because she uses it to aid the patriarchal domestic structure and because she is too old to be considered a sexual being"⁷ (Entzminger 162). Thus, if we too easily allow ourselves to trust Granny Younger, we also too easily dismiss the unheard narratives of other characters, such as Emmy herself.

Similar questions of readerly identification and trust arise in subsequent sections of the novel. Richard Burlage, for instance, who is the first outsider to claim significant space as a speaker in *Oral History*, is an articulate but painfully disconnected teacher who aims to educate mountain children while expanding his own experiential horizons. Burlage possesses some personal traits that make him an appealing narrator for Smith's contemporary readers, most of whom presumably never lived in turn of the century Appalachia. As an outsider, Burlage also is new to many of the customs and

⁷ Entzminger's observation also suggests that even though Granny Younger's treatments are old, they aren't necessarily pure or good. Smith here gives us another warning not to romanticize or oversimplify the past.

peculiarities of Hoot Owl. His section was, within the novel's world, published by a university press, which suggests that his writing has been accepted – as his granddaughter Jennifer's will be – as historical evidence by an academic body. However, Burlage's own words should serve as a warning against too fully accepting his conclusions. On the first page of his journal, he writes that he expects his sojourn in the mountains to be "a pilgrimage back through time, a pilgrimage to a simpler era, back – dare I hope it – to the very roots of consciousness and belief" (*OH* 97). Burlage is, from the moment he departs Richmond, disinclined to see mountain residents as his contemporaries, or as anything short of elemental figures. As Jones points out, "Smith underlines the problem in Richard's perception by repeatedly having him fail to see Dory's face clearly" (Jones 108). Yet, although it is relatively easy to see Burlage's shortcomings as an incisive narrator, his section does serve to undermine stereotypes about the residents of Hoot Owl Holler; his writing advances a between-the-lines perspective by way of its own transparent blind spots.

Because neither Granny, an orally-recorded mountain insider, nor Richard, a writer and outsider, proves a trustworthy historical source, Smith's juxtaposition of their sections suggests the real difficulty in assembling an accurate historical narrative. In *Oral History's* last long section, however, Smith does offer hope that history can be grappled with honestly and insightfully, even if events cannot be definitively explained or understood. For this purpose she chooses to use the spoken narrative of Sally Wade, which functions to reposition the novel after Burlage's lengthy section. Sally's plainspoken but articulate narrative is not only the longest section that follows Burlage's; it also is the most grounded. Sally's words encourage trust in part because

they manage to seem simultaneously effortless and thoughtful. When she speaks of her mother, Dory, for instance, Sally says, “the funny thing about our family at that time was how the whole thing turned around her. It’s like the kaleidoscope we got that year for Christmas...how it had a bright blue spot in the middle of all the patterns” (*OH* 239). In a single remembrance, Sally combines an actual, simple event from her childhood with a rather complex idea about her mother’s central role in the family’s life. That Sally is a verbal artist without much trace of artifice makes her an appealing narrator. A contemporary woman, Sally’s language and lifestyle should also be more familiar to the novel’s readers than those of her ancestors. Although Sally writes from a familiar present, her story is still an important and weighty one; Eckard notes that “Sally’s narrative is equal in length to Granny Younger’s, bringing the novel full circle”(Eckard 152).

That Sally’s adult life is both less tumultuous and less exciting than those of her ancestors is reflective of Smith’s thoughts about the changing spatial landscape of her Virginia mountains. “Once life is homogeneous,” Smith has said, “once it gets all pasteurized and evened out and everything...the grandeur isn’t nearly as possible” (Arnold 8). As the daughter of Dory Cantrell and Luther Wade, Sally is endowed with both her mother’s sensuality and her father’s lyricism. However, the earthy, plainspoken way that Sally describes her sex life with Roy contrasts starkly with Burlage’s descriptions of his relationship with Sally’s mother. While Dory and Richard had clandestine and consuming sex in the local schoolhouse, Sally and Roy “fool around” in bed with his leg propped up and in a cast. Sally’s easy sensuality makes her happy, whereas Dory’s, by her own doing or no, is ultimately destructive. In a similar

way, Sally's lyricism also expresses itself in a more common way than does Little Luther's. While her father expresses his in song and music, Sally uses hers for conversation. She is, as Cook has written, also a prolific talker; she is "filled with words and shares all of them with her husband" (*OH* 140). Thus, the Cantrell family traits manifest in safer, more stable ways in Sally than in her ancestors; while this manifestation is not true for all the Cantrell/Wade children of her generation, it does suggest that the contemporary mountains are a tamer place, where love affairs and curses play out on a smaller scale.

There are other voices at work in *Oral History*, most of them belonging to residents of Hoot Owl Holler. Rose Hibbits and Jink Cantrell each narrate a section, as does Mrs. Luddie Davenport, an old woman in the community who believes that Red Emmy haunts the Cantrell home place. These sections ground the longer ones by suggesting the degree to which the Cantrell's tumultuous history is truly a community experience, something that affects and interests their neighbors and others not directly involved. The inclusion of these shorter, sometimes peripheral sections also magnifies Smith's decision not to include sections voiced by the likes of Red Emmy and Dory, neither of whom has a tangible voice in the novel despite being so central to its conceits. Though Smith originally drafted a section from Red Emmy's perspective – it sounded, she said, like "bad Benjy" of *The Sound and the Fury* – her editor advised her to excise it, thus leaving Emmy as "an unexplained mystery at its core" (Arnold 17). Bauer argues that voicelessness is an appropriate narrative condition for other central characters, too: "Giving to these transcendental characters actual voices would declare their physical reality and thereby diminish their legendary stature" (Bauer 144).

Taken together, Smith's omissions set against her inclusions of narrators from different generations, geographies, and sources serve to paint more than just Red Emmy as an "unexplained mystery." The past of the novel, from witches to romance and parentage, is ultimately indecipherable, a reality that Smith deliberately cultivated. In an interview, Smith admitted

I think that was one thing I was trying to say in *Oral History*. It's just the idea that you never know what happened in the past, really...When you go back to look for it, all you ever get is your interpretation of it. No matter how much you do and how much you record people and so on, you never really know exactly the way it was...it is always the teller's tale, that no matter who's telling the story, it is always the teller's tale, and you never finally know exactly the way it was (Arnold 6).

Still, as Hovis has written, *Oral History* is also an invitation to pay attention to history, as the cobbled-together narrative created over a century by different storytellers is more accurate than any of their individual tales. An event or perception's survival in family legend does not guarantee its literal truth, but its associations and the reactions it inspires are, in their own ways, revelatory.

In an addendum to the 2003 paperback edition of *Oral History*, Smith noted that the novel's structure, with its frame, unreliable narrators, and written and oral perspectives, proved confusing to some readers. "Red Emmy and Almarine and Dory and Pearl and Sally and all those stories," she explains, "were on the tape that Jennifer took back to her class...I'm afraid nobody got it" ("Reader's Guide"). A likely source of this confusion is the novel's final section, which explains what happens when Jennifer presents her ancestral research to Dr. Ripman and her college classmates. "Jennifer's tape," it says, "will have enough banging and crashing and wild laughter on it to satisfy even the most hardened cynic in the class" (*OH* 284). Though the tape, then, did record

noises in the house, there is no mention of voices or long stories on its reels; only the conventional sounds of an old and haunted house. There is, in fact, no indication whether Jennifer herself has heard the voices of her family's past. If she had, it seems unlikely that she would be able to dismiss her relatives, as the omniscient narrator says she does, as simply "very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe" (*OH* 285). Though we cannot know for certain how many, if any, of the stories Jennifer has told, it is clear that she remains a true outsider to her mountain clan, unable to accept or even access her family's complex and often painful lives.

MYTH AND RELIGION

Because *Oral History* tells of four generations in the Cantrell family, it covers a larger number of years than did Smith's earlier novels. The novel, while rarely didactic, thus charts some of the changes in Appalachia and its residents as the twentieth century progresses. Smith addresses these changes through both literal details in the story – Pricey Jane's magazines, for instance, and Al Cantrell's shag-carpeted van – and metaphorical motifs, some of which span the entire novel. One of the subtle ways Smith comments on the evolution of Hoot Owl Holler, specifically, is by her use of spiritual imagery. In Granny Younger's section of the novel, which is the first on Jennifer's tape, there is little mention of church, Jesus, or other signifiers of Christianity. Instead, there are pointed and frequent references to ancient mythologies and goddesses. By the novel's midpoint, though, the Christian churches near Hoot Owl are central, drawing the attention of Richard Burlage as he pursues Dory Cantrell. The church scenes in this

section are powerful, but they do not possess the sense of mystery and ethereal possibility that color Granny Younger's stories. The spirituality of Appalachia, Smith suggests, is becoming less steeped in the natural world and mysticism, and more in the relatively restrained environment of Christianity. This change is even more marked in Sally Cantrell's section of the novel, which is conspicuously grounded and matter-of-fact: mystery and danger have, to an extent, been tamed by livelihoods that seem more stable, but also more mundane. Thus, spiritual motifs in *Oral History* serve as both culturally significant details in their own right and signifiers of broader change in Appalachia.

A large share of critical attention has been given to the spiritual elements present in Granny Younger's section of the novel, which range from symbolically loaded character names to iconography and referential situations. Hill, for instance, spends much of her "Mythic Roles for Women: *Oral History*" drawing connections between character names and mythic characters and conventions. She classifies Almarine as a sort of water god, and rightly notes that even Granny Younger's rather plain name evokes ethereal ideas through its juxtaposition of old and young. "A reversal of full cycle," Hill writes, "[Granny Younger's] name implies eternal return" (Hill). Cook makes similar associations when she points out the importance of Red Emmy's rumored home, which is a cave. The cave, Cook suggests, implies Emmy's "sacred nature" because of its associations with mythical origin stories. Emmy is, in fact, the character most undeniably painted as mythic. Mysterious in her own right, she is also described as a sort of sun goddess, with "reddest red [hair], a red so dark it was nigh to purple" and "color flamed out in her cheeks" (*OH* 44). According to Granny Younger, Emmy vanishes

at will from Almarine's sight, and uses a wish-granting redbird to lead Almarine to her bathing pool. However, part of Emmy's mystery derives from the difficulty of tying her to any one mythic character, or even any single tradition of storytelling. As Bauer has written, Emmy is as much a "wicked witch" as a goddess, "hovering in the margins" of Almarine and Pricey Jane's "fairytale" (Bauer 139). The variety of mythologies and stories with which Emmy and the other characters mentioned by Granny Younger intensifies the sense of wildness and possibility in her section of *Oral History*.

Though Granny Younger's story does not often reference churchgoing or Jesus, the spiritual motifs she includes do occasionally mix Christian symbolism with their references to ancient mythology and other legends and traditions. Ostwalt, for instance, has noted that "Granny Younger typifies the confusion of superstition with traditional Christianity by reciting a magical formula to stop bleeding. The formula is based on Ezekiel 16:6...but in Lee Smith's mystical, sacred Appalachian setting, it takes on magical and supernatural qualities" (Ostwalt 108). Entzminger points out instances of overlap in her essay "Destroying the Bad Belle," explaining how, for instance, even Red Emmy has Christian associations with Lilith, a figure of Hebrew legend. Lilith was Adam's original counterpart, but refused to recognize his authority, behavior which led to her banishment and subsequent attempts to endanger Adam's children. This narrative parallels Emmy's story, as community members blame her for the misfortune that befalls the Cantrell family after Almarine ousts her, pregnant, from his land. Almarine has chosen, as Bauer writes, "to stay in Eden without Eve rather than lose Eden, which is what he fears will happen, for his sexual relations with Red Emmy leave him too exhausted to work his land" (Bauer 137). Bauer touches here on two examples

of how religious motifs are extrapolated throughout *Oral History*. The first is how love of land is itself a sort of mountain spirituality; the second, how Emmy, a beguiling and spiritualized woman, is demonized by the Hoot Owl community when she interferes with male authority. These two are not unrelated.

The spiritual importance of land in *Oral History* is one of the elements that most directly ties the novel to the Southern literary canon. Bauer specifically draws a parallel between the valuation and exploitation of land in Smith's novel and in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, citing the symbolic similarity of "Ghostland," the theme park built around the old Cantrell cabin, to the golf course built on Compson family land. Both pieces of land are sites of spiritual and emotional investment that are repurposed for commercial enterprises, ones that cash in on elements of the land's actual history. In Faulkner, the golf course offers middle class men an artificial approximation of a privileged man's life of leisure, on land that was once his. In the case of Hoot Owl Holler, the land's dark history is turned into a joke or thrill for the financial benefit of the Cantrell descendants. The significance of the change in the land's valuation is highlighted by the fact that Almarine's grandson, "Al," is the person who oversees its conversion to Ghostland. While the first Almarine values his land to a fault – making it, as Hovis has written, a stand-in for the family ties he lacked – his grandson sees the land as a means to a financial end. Al, Bauer observes, "is more concerned with the value of the land he lives on than with the humanity of the characters in these legends, which he is violating through exploitation" (Bauer 157).⁸ From Almarine to Al, Hoot Owl Holler

⁸ It is worth noting here that Al, the broker of the Cantrell land, is not even related by blood to the original Almarine. Al is the son of Little Luther Wade and Ora Mae, so while the men share common family members, one is not a direct descendent of the other.

has come to signify and carry generations of memories and tragedies, but even those have their price in contemporary Appalachia.

The spiritual connection between people and their land is not a vague or undefined connection in *Oral History*. Ostwalt has written at length about how the connection represents a sort of dual-spiritual aesthetic at work in Lee Smith's mountains. He argues that the first spiritual impulse "appears in the form of traditional religions that attempt to transcend the mountain peaks and valley floors; the second is characterized by an elemental, supernatural power bound up by nature and the mountains themselves" (Ostwalt 98). Though these spiritual forces coexist, the Cantrell family's narrative suggests that the elemental, nature-tied spirituality ceded ground to traditional religions in the 20th century, in terms of adherence if not power. Ostwalt astutely describes some of the implications that Smith's attention to changed spirituality in Appalachia carries:

The connection to the elemental, which depends on the connection to nature, the land, the spiritual, and the mythic past, becomes tenuous as the unspoiled, wild beauty of the land that captivated such characters as Almarine Cantrell and Richard Burlage slowly yields to strip mines, shopping malls, and towns and villages. As concrete and pavement fill the mountain hollows, the witches disappear, superstition is replaced by religion, and Smith's female characters, who had enjoyed a mystical connection with the primal, search with fewer results for that secret power available through nature and spirit (110).

The last line of Ostwalt's passage connects Almarine's relationship to spirituality to his relationship with Red Emmy, one of those mountain women in possession of "secret power" and a "mystical connection with the primal." Although Emmy seems powerful largely because of the mythic way Granny Younger describes her, she does have traits that support those descriptions. Emmy is unusually tall for a woman, and she also works Almarine's land instead of doing the household chores which mountain womanly

commonly were assigned. Yet, as Almarine's wild and consuming love for her yields to community pressure that he reject her, Emmy loses any agency she may have had in the Hoot Owl environs.⁹ Almarine does not want to be enchanted by Emmy, but in seeking to assert his independence from her, he submits himself to the organized patriarchal community who seek to disempower Emmy. These are the men – and Granny Younger – at Joe Johnson's store, with whom Almarine plays cards and drinks before and after his time with Emmy. Threatened by Almarine and Emmy's frequent lovemaking – it's unusual, and keeps him from their store – and by Emmy's near-equality with her lover, Granny Younger in particular brands her a witch and seeks to oust her and restore order. Like the natural spirituality with which she is associated, Emmy is thrown off in favor of a patriarchal belief system; she becomes the scapegoat, henceforth, for the curse that seems to plague the Cantrell descendants. Entzminger gets to the center of this plot point when she argues that the curse "does not come from Emmy's witchcraft but from a community that sentences its women to lives of constrained passivity and rejects those who resist conformity" (Entzminger 163). Thus, religion, land, female power, and sexuality are all fused in the story of Almarine and Emmy, and to a lesser extent later in *Oral History*.

Cook addresses those later sections in her work on myth, religion, and sexuality. Writing particularly about the relationship between Burlage and Dory Cantrell, she notes that "Richard finds in Dory the divinity for which he has long been searching. His

⁹ In fact, Granny Younger reports that Almarine is rumored to have found and murdered Emmy after Pricey Jane and his child die. This rumor highlights the extent to which Emmy lacks agency after Almarine dismisses her. Outside of a marriage or other family relationship, Emmy has no protection from hardship or violence, and there is no community retribution for Almarine for killing her.

flirtation with the rural church of Tug runs parallel to his relationship with Dory...because Dory and Richard come together right after a revival" (Cook 134). Although this mating makes for a spiritually significant start, Cook correctly observes that living in the myth becomes a problem, albeit one that is worse for the female in the relationship. The ethereal relationship cannot last long under the assault of reality, especially with the irresolute Richard as its steward. What is, for Richard, a beautiful memory and experience and sweet loss, is destruction for Dory. She's the one with children to bear and raise, and she has fewer options than does Richard for finding happiness elsewhere. In her story, Dory unites the abstract spiritual with the jarringly grounded, preparing the way through her sad narrative for the Cantrells who follow. She is associated with the mythic, but she is also heartbreakingly human.

MOTHERS AND OTHERS

Mothers in *Oral History* are frequently absent from the lives of their children, but they are also central to the novel's plots and deeply resonant for many of its characters. Beginning with the cave of Red Emmy, who lives alone with her father, Isom, Smith chronicles homes that are largely bereft of matriarchs. Where mothers are absent, other maternal figures sometimes take their places; Dory, for instance, is largely responsible for her siblings after the death of her mother, Pricey Jane, until her aunt, Vashti, arrives to run the household. Vashti and her daughter, Ora Mae, ultimately raise many of the Cantrell children, stepping into the maternal roles vacated by Dory and Pearl. Although Vashti and Ora Mae are important characters for reasons other than

their mixed race heritage, the women both represent the racial others in the novel, which is especially significant because Hoot Owl Holler has been such a racially homogenous society. As Prajznerova has written, Vashti and Ora Mae are a “conspicuous embodiment of the intermarriage and exchange between Native Americans and American Europeans in Smith’s Appalachian fiction” (Praj. 65). Prajznerova notes the ways in which Vashti, particularly, is associated with Cherokee elements and motifs. In *Oral History*, motherhood is linked with difference through Vashti and Ora Mae.

From a literal standpoint, the attention Smith gives to mothers and their work in the novel is instructive. In Pricey Jane’s brief section of the novel, for instance, the amount of time she spends working while also frequently nursing her child suggests the intense work to which a typical, 20th century Appalachian mother may have committed herself. Pricey Jane “sends Eli around with a panful of dried corn to scatter while she sets Dory up on a pallet in the floor and makes some cornbread and cuts some sidemeat off the piece of it hanging there by the chimney and fries it. She nurses Dory again” (*OH* 72). Vashti, too, is depicted as a hard worker, “making coffee and frying eggs” within hours of arriving at Almarine’s cabin, and Ora Mae raises both Dory and, for awhile, Dory’s children (*OH* 86). Like Toni Morrison and Ellen Douglas, among others, Smith treats the domestic work of women and children as a worthy subject of her art.

Mothers in *Oral History* are scarce, but also difficult for other characters to understand. Sometimes, this enigma exists because of unexplained physical absence; Red Emmy’s mother, for instance, is probably never heard from, and Emmy herself physically vanishes from the Cantrells’ lives after she reportedly becomes pregnant

with a child of her own.¹⁰ In part, too, this scarcity of mothers reflects historical reality. According to the U.S. Census, a person born in 1870 could expect to live for just about forty years; by the turn of the century, life expectancy hovered around age fifty, and it is possible that these ages would be even lower in Appalachia than in the rest of the country. However, most of the mothers in Smith's novel do not die simply because they have reached a relatively old age. Poisoned milk, possible suicide, and complications of childbirth kill Pricey Jane, Dory, and Pearl, respectively, leaving their children motherless. These dark deaths are said to be caused by Red Emmy's curse, a community belief that allows men and women to continue positioning Emmy as a villain.

Specifically, Smith's mothers often suffer because of Hoot Owl society's inability to reconcile their embodiment of both the sexual and the maternal, despite their necessary inextricability. This fear of the sexual is particularly evident in the stories of Emmy and Dory, but even mothers almost entirely absent from the novel are drawn into this idea. Pricey Jane, for instance, recalls how "if you asked her [mother] about love...she'd act like there was something shameful in it" (*OH* 68). As Cook has written, "to all these women, the union of sexuality and motherhood is natural, but to most of society, maternity is the end-product rather than the site of sexuality" (Cook 141). That Emmy and Almarine continue their frequent lovemaking even after she is rumored to

¹⁰ I use "probably" when stating that Emmy's mother is never mentioned in the story because Smith does gesture, but with little evidence, toward the possibility that Granny Younger could be Emmy's mother. When explaining what she knows of Emmy's life in the cave with Isom, Granny obliquely mentions her own past with Isom. "They was a time when we was children, we was friends," she says, "in a way 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" (*OH* 46). Though we can only speculate about the details of Granny and Isom's relationship, it is possible that Emmy is Granny's daughter, left so that Granny could continue her role as a leader and healer in the community, or for some other, unrevealed reason.

be pregnant is the reason she is finally expelled; Hovis points out that “Granny is disturbed not so much by Emmy’s sexuality as by the fact that she is openly sexual at the same time that she desires to be domestic” (Hovis 149). Similarly, Richard leaves Dory behind soon after they conceive twins. That Richard does not realize she is pregnant is immaterial; the significant point is that he cannot see a wild and sensual mountain woman as an appropriate wife and mother in his Richmond life.

Male characters, though, are not the only ones who cannot reconcile sex and motherhood. Dory’s daughter Pearl, who is a product of her relationship with Burlage, abandons her family for an adventurous, illegal liaison with a high school student, seeking sexual fulfillment from a man with whom she has no children. The character of Pearl echoes the Queen in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, though her choice of a younger sexual partner makes her actions even more scandalous. In *Oral History*, it is only in Sally’s second marriage, to Roy, that the maternal and the sexual are successfully reconciled, and even that linkage is conditional. Though Sally and Roy have a fulfilling sex life and enjoy spending time as a family with her grandchildren, they did not have or raise children together as a couple.

Still, critics frequently assert that Sally and Roy’s relationship represents successful reconciliation of the sexual woman and the maternal, familial lifestyle. Cook, for one, has written, “Healing is suggested by Sally and Roy’s marriage, one based on equality and communication” (Cook 83). Sally’s words are, in large part, what sets her apart from Red Emmy and Dory, neither of whom narrates the novel or is shown talking much with their lovers. Sally loves to talk and Roy loves to listen, even during their lovemaking. That Roy listens seems to be key; it is his behavior, rather than Sally’s

loquacity, that is necessary for their happy union. Sally's first marriage helps us see the importance of Roy's listening skills. Though Sally liked to talk to her first husband, too, he "didn't believe in talking to women and he never said one word...[he would] just roll over and go to sleep" (*OH* 234). Hovis sees this as commentary by Smith on a male partner's responsibility in his relationship: "Roy is the kind of a man Smith seems to be calling for, someone who can accept a woman as both sexual and source of wisdom, not one or the other" (Hovis 161). Wisdom is, of course, tied to responsibility and motherhood. Through Sally, Cook argues, "Smith insists on the survival and even proliferation of the sexual mother" (Cook 142).

Though the plights of these female characters are themselves significant, they also are suggestive of larger ideas. For example, Eckard has noted that, "While these women are given little voice themselves, the voices Smith creates to tell their stories reflect the plural realities and multiple modes of expression associated with female subjectivity" (Eckard 140). Smith thus underscores the uncertainty of the history that her narrative strategies suggest by placing voiceless mothers at the center of it. Eckard goes on to say, "Sadly, the maternal in *Oral History* also functions as a metaphor for the fragile culture of the mountains, soon to be overwhelmed, displaced, and silenced by larger social forces from the outside world" (Eckard 138). Mothers are, in this approximation, akin to "others," narrative signifiers of difference and, often, of exploitation. While this is a secondary position for some characters – Dory is first a mother, which puts her in the position of "other" – *Oral History* also devotes narrative space to characters who are inherently mother and other. The most conspicuous embodiment of both roles is Vashti, who, along with her daughter Ora Mae, is of an

indeterminate race. Vashti “looks like she might be part Indian” according to Almarine’s neighbor and admirer Rose Hibbits; “She is a tall woman with thick shiny black hair, dark complected, of course, and a big strong nose and a wide mouth and big dark eyes” (*OH* 86). In a 2001 interview with Prajznervová, Smith confirms her intention that Vashti and Ora Mae be read as Native Americans. “I’ve always been really fascinated with...this sense of the other...I was just always so curious bout Melungeons or about Indians or about people that lived way, way up in the hills” (Praj. 109).

Vashti and Ora Mae have been others in an extra-textual sense, as well; in secondary criticism, Prajznerová is one of few critics to emphasize their role in *Oral History*. As in the novel itself, the women have taken subordinate positions to Red Emmy, Dory, and Sally Wade. On one hand, this relative obscurity makes a great deal of sense. While Emmy and Dory are sources of fascination, longing, and sometimes anger or envy for multiple characters, Ora Mae and Vashti do not often inspire emotional reactions from other characters. Because of their chronologies and relative seclusion at the Cantrell homeplace, too, they are barely glimpsed by either Granny Younger or Richard Burlage, whose perspectives dictate much of the novel’s content. Still, when analyzing a work so invested in telling untold stories and questioning dominant historical narratives, to avoid examining the resonance of its most othered characters seems a mistake. Prajznerová points out multiple instances in which she believes critics have misread scenes involving Vashti and Ora Mae. With respect to Vashti, the critic argues that when she has received critical attention, it has been as an “embodiment of dependent and circumscribed female domesticity” (Praj. 77). Citing statements by Jones and Cook, among others, Prajznerová suggests that critics have too easily dismissed

Vashti and Almarine's relationship as either "loveless" or characterized by "loneliness and isolation" (Praj. 78). Instead, Prajznerová contends, "Vashti's efficient running of the household does not need to imply her unhappy confinement and patriarchal subjugation....She searches Almarine out because of her sense of family ties" rather than her need for a man to care for her and Ora Mae (Praj. 79).¹¹

Though Prajznerová's critical angle is compelling, she does not provide persuasive textual support for the existence of a loving, familial relationship between Vashti and Almarine. Still, she does expose some overstatement by the critics she quotes, and her admonition that Vashti has not been adequately accounted for is just. Prajznerová questions, for instance, Dorothy Combs Hill's assertion that Vashti's story marks "the elimination of the wife of will, the one who will not show off her body when the patriarch bids, and the substitution of the obedient Esther" (77, Hill 72). Though Hill draws this analysis from her reading of the Biblical Vashti's story, it is at odds with what we know of *Oral History's* Vashti. To paint Vashti, whom the text depicts as a strong and imposing woman who is capable of quickly taking over a household, as a figure of weakness and subjugation is to stray too far from the details of the novel. Indeed, even when she is physically weak and on her deathbed, Vashti "has to have a glass of water right there on the night table just so, if you put it on the wrong side she'll yell and you have to get up and go move it" (216).

¹¹ As Entzminger notes with respect to Red Emmy, a woman's need for a man is not necessarily defined by her need for material support. Entzminger describes the way, with no family to protect her, Emmy is vulnerable to men who wish to do her harm, or even to murder at the hands of her ex lover. Thus, to say that Vashti needs Almarine to "take care of her" is not necessarily to imply that she cannot manage a household successfully on her own; she may realize the need for male, societal, protection, particularly as an outsider in Appalachia.

Although, like Red Emmy before her, Vashti is a figure whose early life is mysterious, Smith reveals glimpses of her life at Hoot Owl Holler through Jink Cantrell, her son with Almarine.¹² Jink recounts how, “Mamaw locked me down in the root cellar for lying” for two days, and observes Vashti “working along with the men [like] she always does” (*OH* 189, 192). Later, he recalls how Dory “wouldn’t do a thing Mamaw said, which tickled me and Mary, but Mamaw liked to rode her to death, telling her what was good for her” while she was pregnant (*OH* 193). Vashti, then, is a hard worker who, like Red Emmy, does not resign herself to traditional women’s chores. She is also a strict disciplinarian, and stepmother to a beautiful girl who will not listen to her. It is this last, circumstantial, trait that is perhaps most useful in constructing an alternate reading of Vashti. As Ora Mae will do after her, she persists in trying to mold the Cantrell offspring: she tells them what is best for them, despite their reluctance to listen. Though Jink’s narration makes it reasonably clear that Vashti is not a gentle or soothing parent, she seems to have the best interests of her children, biological or not, in mind.

The dynamic between Vashti and Dory makes sense in the context of some of Smith’s comments about Vashti: “[Vashti] and Ora Mae had that sort of sense of the future, some sort of knowing more than they wanted to know, some sort of life force that they had” (Praj. 109). Taken together, Vashti’s actions and Smith’s statement

¹² Vashti and Almarine have five biological children. Though Jink narrates only a few pages of the novel, there is reason to think he is relatively reliable. He is only a child, but impresses Richard Burlage with his intelligence. He also has first-hand access to the Cantrell family, and no discernable agenda to misrepresent them in his telling. In the 2003 Ballantine paperback edition of *Oral History*, Smith appended an imaginary conversation between herself and Jink, in which she expresses regret at his departure from the novel and says, “you were the one who really should have written this novel” (*OH* “Reader’s Guide”).

suggest that Vashti sees herself as a sort of protector, loving or not, of the Cantrell children, meant to strengthen and prepare them for the hardships she sees in their futures. Perhaps because of the trouble she can sense, Vashti is dismissive of people like Little Luther Wade, whom she “wouldn’t give...much credit” (she accuses of having his “head in the clouds” (195)). That Luther will eventually marry Dory Cantrell is something that Vashti can foresee, as is the tragedy that will follow their marriage when Dory is killed by a train.¹³ Of course, while some of Vashti’s traits are made reasonably clear in the novel, her exact motivations remain opaque; hers is not one of the voices on Jennifer’s tape recorder.

Though Vashti does not have a section in the novel, her daughter Ora Mae occupies some pages in which to voice her thoughts.¹⁴ Almost immediately, she addresses the foreknowledge which Smith said she gave her. “I wisht I didn’t know what-all I know, nor have to do what-all I have to...I’ve been working my knuckles straight down to the bone taking care of Cantrells.” These sentiments repeat themselves many times in the few pages Ora Mae claims; she says later “I know what I know but wisht I didn’t, I’ve got the gift you don’t never want to have,” and “I knowed what I knowed, and I knowed what I had to do” (*OH* 208). Ora Mae is always “knowing,” and in her resentful determination to take care of Cantrells, she often reads as a character shaped by her will. This force is particularly true in the section where Ora Mae tells the

¹³ The train that kills Dory is the same one that brought Richard Burlage to Hoot Owl. The circumstances of Dory’s death are thus another instance of the novel’s circularity – the train began Dory’s affair with Richard, even as it gives it an irrevocable conclusion.

¹⁴ This is another instance of the mystery and myth surrounding the Cantrells and their ilk becoming less pronounced in future generations. The uncertainty that surrounds Dory yields to the relatively straightforward tale of Sally, just as Vashti’s opacity gives way to the strange but more accessible life of Ora Mae.

story of her refusal to run away with Parrot Blankenship, whom she loved deeply but “knew” would leave her before long. Still, Ora Mae, like Vashti, is not passive. She is, after all, the woman who chooses not to give Dory the note from Richard Burlage, in which he asks her to accompany him to Richmond. Ora Mae is also the person to finally throw Pricey Jane’s golden earrings, which she believes carry the family’s curse, down from a mountaintop. Sally’s description of the moment when she does this is riveting:

She pulled something little out of the pocket, pulled it out slow and painful, the way she does everything, and then she let out the awfulest low sad wail I ever heard. It did not sound like a person at all. It sounded like something right out of the burying ground, some rising up of age and pain. She fiddled with what she had – I’d guessed what it was, by then, and I’ll bet you have too – and she got one of them in each hand and held them up, I watched her, for a long, long moment, to her own ears. That old, old ugly woman! It was just about the worst and saddest thing I ever saw. And I’ve seen some things. Then she slung both arms straight out and threw the earrings into the swirling clouds in the gorge and they went down, down, I guess, to the river so far below, and I guess that’s where they are now, thank God. Gone. Ora Mae had the right idea. But she stood there with her arms flung out, like a statue in a church or something, for the longest time. She gave me the creeps. Then she lowered her arms real slow, and while I watched, she shrank back from whatever she was to old Ora Mae again, so old she can’t even drive (277).

In the moment Sally describes, Ora Mae claimed her power in a revealing and transformative way. That she holds the earrings to her own ears before flinging them down suggests the complexity of her feelings about the Cantrell family. Although most of her direct comments about the family refer to their dependence on her and their weakness, the gesture she performs with the earrings implies that she, too, has had a longing to wear them, cursed as they may be. The existence of this desire is reinforced in Ora Mae’s section, in which she refuses to listen to Rhoda Hibbits when Rhoda tells her that she is a pretty girl. “That was a lie,” Ora Mae says, “Dory was the pretty girl” (*OH* 210).

By doing away with the earrings, however, Ora Mae is not washing her hands of the Cantrells. For years after she flings the earrings into the gorge, she remains a part of the Cantrell household, marrying Luther Wade and living with Al, his wife Debra, and their children. What she seems to be doing instead is refusing to be consumed with longing and resentment any longer. When Jennifer comes to visit her family, Ora Mae is knitting on the porch, but she is not looking at her needlework. Instead, “she’s looking off to the side yard where two of her grandsons, Al’s children, have tied string on some june bugs they are swinging around and around through the hot evening air” (*OH* 13). With Dory’s death and Ora Mae’s marriage to Luther, Ora Mae finally has become an insider in the Cantrell family; she is, in her big green chair, a matriarchal figure. That she and Luther conceive a son and call him “Almarine” underscores her thorough absorption into the family.

Oral History closes with a brief, matter-of-fact look at what Ora Mae and many of the other characters do after Jennifer leaves Hoot Owl Holler. This look is long-term, revealing, for example, that Jennifer marries her college professor and “never” returns to her family’s ancestral home, that Little Luther and Ora Mae will simply “get sick one by one and then die,” and that the theme park Ghostland will charge visitors \$4.50 each to listen to eerie laughter and see an empty rocking chair rock (*OH* 285). As Reilly has written, “all these details have the disappointing feel of the wide-awake world after an especially powerful dream” (Reilly 92). This is the price, Reilly argues, of “freedom from illusion.” The painful crimes of passion and tragic love stories from the days of Almarine and Dory Cantrell may be laid to rest, but a less enchanting present has taken their place.

“Our Years As a Tale That is Told”: *Fair and Tender Ladies*

In Lee Smith's first four novels, her protagonists were young girls and women with artistic temperaments. While Susan Tobey experimented with writing poetry in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* and Crystal Spangler took up crafting in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, neither character was defined by her particular talent. Smith introduced a more committed artist in the novel *Family Linen* (1985). Candy Snipes, a rural beautician, has an integrated personality in which her art defines her life. Like the artists in many of Smith's short stories – Florrie of *Cakewalk*, Cheryl of *Bob, a Dog* – Candy's art is considered humble. Caring and down-to-earth, she beautifies her female clients. In *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), however, Smith first introduced an integrated artist of a more conventional sort: Ivy Rowe is a writer, through and through. Though she mostly writes letters and never is published, Ivy is the first protagonist in Smith's fiction to make her talent for writing the center of her life. Unlike Candy, however, Ivy's art mostly remains personal. She initially dreams of being a famous writer, but dedicates herself to caring for her large family, instead.

Ivy's talent gave Smith new parameters for her experimentations with voice. *Fair and Tender Ladies* was Smith's first epistolary novel, and it is narrated entirely through Ivy's letters. Beginning at age twelve and continuing until she is near death in her late seventies, Ivy writes letters that tell the story of a life largely spent in one place. She writes to teachers, friends, family members, and even a would-be pen-pal, all from the

mountains of western Virginia. The audience for Ivy's letters is almost entirely female. In addition to her physical mountain community, which frequently denies her support, Ivy creates a sustaining, though far-flung, community of women through her letters. As Wagner-Martin argues, Ivy's tapestry of letters is "the thread she follows through – and clear of – the labyrinth of her life of poverty and confusion and femaleness" (Wagner-Martin 28). It does not matter to Ivy that her letters often go unanswered. In fact, many of Ivy's most revealing missives are addressed to her sister, Silvaney, whom Ivy knows is dead. "I had to write this letter to you, Silvaney," she writes in one, "to set it all down. I am still in pain and sorrow, but I remain, Your sister, Ivy Rowe" (*FATL* 240). Ivy, Kearns observes, "orders, clarifies, and makes real the discrete elements of her world" as she reminds herself of her connections and communities in her letters (Kearns 188).

Ivy is a thoughtful and analytical writer, and thus a capable guide through the events of her life. Because so many of Ivy's letters remain unsent, addressed to dead or departed family members who will never read them, she is frank and truthful. In her letters to Silvaney, in particular, Ivy writes with little filter, and with almost no regard for her privacy, sharing the sorts of details that would usually become the stuff of diaries or personal journals. As in *Oral History*, Smith creates here intratextual and real-world reading audiences for Ivy's writing. The events of Ivy's life are one part of her story, subject to analysis by Smith's own readers. However, in the letters that Ivy actually mails, Ivy's own analysis provides a second narrative, adding depth and feeling to Smith's novel. Ivy is a reliable narrator, but that does not mean that she is an objective one.

Through Ivy's letters, Smith continued to explore themes prominent in her earlier fiction. The female artist's quest to forge her identity, the history of rural Appalachia, the tension between religion and spirituality, and the importance of storytelling all are focal points of Ivy's letters. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, though, Smith addresses these themes with a greater sense of optimism and possibility. This sense is most obvious in relation to identity and literacy. While Susan and Brooke, for instance, struggled to speak their community's discourse or produce an alternative dialogue, Ivy absorbs her community's stories and thrives on writing her own, creating a stable sense of herself in the process. Her writing also becomes, to a large extent, a habit by which her peers identify her; it sets her apart in her rural mountain community, but it also unites her public and private selves. Ivy's integration proves essential for her survival. She feels "starved" when she goes without hearing stories, and depressed when she goes without telling them (*FATL* 226).

Ivy's identity also is built upon her dedication to Sugar Fork, where she lives for most of her life. She feels physically connected to the land – "a big yellow sycamore leaf" landing on her porch is "like a blow to [her] heart" – and emotionally invested in protecting it from companies who would cut its lumber and mine its coal (*FATL* 274). Ivy's relationship to her home is inextricably linked to her gender. She does not venture to certain parts of the nearby mountains because she is a girl: "I could of climbed up here by myself, anytime," she thinks, after hiking to the top of Blue Star Mountain with a lover. "But I had not...they said, That is for boys" (*FATL* 233).¹⁵ Just as Ivy feels restricted from areas within her community, she also feels incapable of venturing far

¹⁵ Ivy's letters frequently contain misspellings and slang. In this chapter, I have quoted her writing as it appears in the novel, without correction.

beyond expected boundaries. An unexpected pregnancy prevents her from leaving for Boston as a young woman, and her familial responsibilities yoke her to Sugar Fork, later. Home, for Ivy, is a space deeply characterized by her gender and her family, for both good and bad.

Ivy's reverence for the land is so intense as to be spiritual. Though she never feels an intense connection to the Christianity to which members of her family and community subscribe, she is a seeker of natural beauty. "I would just as soon sit in the breezeway looking out at Bethel Mountain," Ivy writes, "as to go to church" (*FATL* 206). Ivy especially turns to the land when she is grieving. After her husband Oakley's death, for instance, Ivy writes: "some days I feel old as the hills themselves which I walk among now almost without ceasing" (*FATL* 274). She is physically and emotionally of the mountains, despite the attempts of many people – men, especially – to convert her to a more conventional religion. Since publishing *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Smith has continually fictionalized the tension between patriarchal religious traditions and potentially woman-centered, nature based spirituality.

Ivy's relative strength is reflected in her writing style. Though she records plenty of hardship and pain in her letters, Ivy does so with such lively writing and self-awareness that her story is a beautiful one; without careful reading, it is easy to become caught up in Ivy's artistry and gloss over her considerable struggles. Unlike Crystal Spangler in *Black Mountain Breakdown* or Pearl from *Oral History*, Ivy, as Hill has written, "embodies female victory over the social forces, externally inflicted and internally realized, that would destroy her" (Hill 109). Thus, the introduction of Ivy marks a dramatic turning point in Lee Smith's female characters. By creating Ivy,

Kearns argues, “Smith bespeaks her own growing confidence in the mutually regenerative powers of life and art” (Kearns 191). Ivy is preceded in Smith’s fiction by women who strive to assimilate and fill conventional roles in their Southern communities. She is followed, though by Katie Cocker, by Mary Copeland, and by Molly Petree, women who triumph, in ways both subtle and enormous, over pain and the limitations their societies place on women. Molly, the sometime-narrator and protagonist of *On Agate Hill* (2006), is Ivy’s most direct descendant: like Ivy, she writes from her girlhood until her death, chronicling her refusal to accept a woman’s traditional role and her pursuit of passion in difficult circumstances.

Smith drew on multiple women as sources of inspiration in crafting her seventh novel. She chose, for instance, to write *Fair and Tender Ladies* as an epistolary novel largely because of a packet of letters she purchased at a Greensboro, N.C., flea market. “I got real interested in the idea of somebody’s letters being a sort of work of art,” she said in a 1989 interview. “You know, letters over their whole lifetime” (Arnow 62). Smith also was inspired by her encounter with Lou Crabtree, an unassuming older woman who brought to Smith’s writing class “a suitcase full of this stuff that she’d been writing and writing and writing.” Crabtree’s lifetime of writing without seeking publication led Smith to think about writing as a process, and about the ways women’s art often is unrecognized in the public sphere. More personally, Smith was influenced by the illness and death of her mother, Gig. “With Ivy Rowe,” she said, “I really needed to be making up somebody who could just take whatever ‘shit hit the fan.’ Sort of assimilate it and go on. Calling Ivy a “role model,” Smith imbued her narrator with strengths she coveted while handling her mother’s death and difficulties with her teenaged sons (V. Smith 65).

Ivy Rowe proved popular with both critics and Smith's readership. Writing in *The New York Times*, W.P. Kinsella called *Fair and Tender Ladies* Smith's "most ambitious and most fully realized novel to date," claiming readers "will be sorry when this literate, intelligent, insightful, and entertaining novel draws to a close" (Kinsella). Cheryl Merseur of *USA Today* was similarly impressed with Smith's "beautiful letters," though she found the novel's epistolary format unsatisfying in places (Merseur). While *Fair and Tender Ladies* was not named to bestseller lists at the time of its release, it has been published in several editions and remains in print two decades after its initial publication. The novel has also taken on a life beyond the page, inspiring Barbara Bates Smith's one-woman play, "I Remane, Forever, Ivy Rowe." Though Bates Smith's production drew mixed reviews – *The New York Times* called a 1991 performance only "intermittently...evocative," it has enjoyed lasting popularity (Gussow): Bates Smith estimates that she has performed as Ivy over 700 times in over twenty years.

LITERACY AND IDENTITY

From her earliest letters, Ivy makes apparent her commitment to and love for the written word. The first lines of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, in fact, read: "Your name is not much common here, I think it is so pretty too. I say it now and agin it tastes sweet in my mouth like honey or cane" (*FATL* 11). Words are beautiful to Ivy even when her life is not, and they stimulate her senses in uncommon ways. However, Ivy's devotion to reading and writing goes beyond aesthetic enjoyment. Ivy depends upon her literacy to establish and nurture her very identity, working through dilemmas and decisions in the

letters she writes. Ivy retells stories of her family and region and creates her own stories as she goes, making a place for herself in the storytelling tradition of her mountain homeland. When difficult times in life threaten to overwhelm Ivy, it is these stories that sustain her, restoring her to life as she both hears and writes them.

Because of the isolated surroundings in which she is raised, her family and friends identify Ivy as a prodigious writer of letters. She initially relies on her teacher and family members to transport letters to their recipients, a necessity that, in addition to making the community aware of the frequency with which Ivy sends letters, also compromises the privacy of her communications. Her first letter to Hanneke, a would-be pen-pal, for instance, is returned to her by Mrs. Brown because she deems its subject matter inappropriate. Ivy's position as a young girl in a rural community makes her commitment to writing her honest thoughts more difficult to sustain. Further impeding her writing is her family's poverty, which requires that Ivy perform a number of tiring chores at Sugar Fork. "Momma gets pitched off iffen I read too much," Ivy writes in her very first letter, "I have to help out and I will just fill my head with notions, Momma says it will do me no good in the end" (*FATL* 15).

Although Ivy's writing establishes her identity in her family and community, it is not always viewed positively. As a child, Ivy's habit of writing is seen as a damaging and even a dangerous thing, a path to unattainable dreams and unavoidable disappointment. "In the same way that Aldous Rife warns Richard not to become involved with Dory since at best he can only create longings that her life can never fulfill," Locklear argues, "Ivy's mother becomes upset with Ivy's constant reading" (Locklear 196). However, as she ages and the mountains she calls home evolve, Ivy's

writing becomes a novelty that, while still uncommon, carries less of a stigma. "I am old and crazy," Ivy writes in one of her last letters, "I have got things to think on and letters to write" (*FATL* 303). Without children to care for or a mother to assist, Ivy's writing stops being seen as a distraction from productivity.

Ivy's writing is characteristic of her identity, but it is also a tool by which she explores other components of her selfhood. The critic Tanya Long Bennett, for instance, argues that Ivy's letter writing affords her the opportunity to try on different identities and ideologies, deconstructing and shedding them as she writes about them. Ivy "fluctuates between acceptance and rejection of the ideologies that influence her," Bennett writes, thereby creating and revealing her "fluid self" (Bennett 76). By her use of that term, Bennett suggests that Ivy subscribes to a system of relativism and causality rather than one of universal truths. Ivy offers some support for this characterization in her later letters, telling her daughter Joli, "The older I get, the more different things seem natural enough to me. I take a real big view!" (*FATL* 279). I would add, however, that Ivy, though open-minded and conscious of the complexities inherent in things and people, also expresses her belief in the "essential" nature of people. In the very same letter, she writes, "The true nature will come out whether or no, we have all got a true nature and we can't hide it, it will pop out when you least expect it" (*FATL* 279). Ivy is a woman open to surprise, possibility, and variety in life, but she is not such a relativist to deny the existence of some truths.

George Hovis offers a similar interpretation of Ivy's writing as it relates to her selfhood, arguing that that Ivy has an "emerging postmodern consciousness: she takes a progressively eclectic approach in understanding her life, basing her interpretations in

one moment on the model of a folk narrative and in the next on nineteenth-century British gothic novels” (Hovis 162). Like Bennett, he notes the ways Ivy resists easy categorization by drawing from diverse ideologies and sources in the formation of her self. Hovis adds, however, that Ivy “conceives of herself in terms of a present self and a past self, and she consistently privileges her girlhood...imagining a continuity of experience between her girlhood and her present self” (Hovis 172). This profession is borne out, Hovis argues, by Ivy’s marriage to Oakley and her return to her parents’ home on Sugar Fork, where she initially lives a life not unlike her mother’s.

An especially striking technique that Ivy uses to establish her identity in both her letters and her life is her creation of “doubles” for herself, figures who, Bennett has written, “mirror a part of [Ivy] she could not otherwise see” (Bennett 94). Silvaney and Honey Breeding, particularly, are figures that live life without some of the restrictions that Ivy does; they are, in Ivy’s letters, near-mythic characters through whom she lives vicariously. MacKethan also describes this strategy, noting how both connecting to and, in a sense, creating, Silvaney allows Ivy to envision herself “running wildly, silently, through the hills” (Mackethan 107). Katherine Kearns states it even more explicitly: “Silvaney is a conduit to carry away madness, the sacrificial figure who remains necessary for the female artist to survive. Thus exercised, Ivy may accommodate the world without going mad” (Kearns 190). Ivy is too rooted at Sugar Fork to travel as does Honey Breeding and too practical to wander the woods like Silvaney, yet her connection to both characters nourishes the parts of her identity that long for their respective freedoms of movement.

Though critics might quibble in their interpretations of the ways in which Ivy defines herself through her writing, there is no disagreement that she does capture her identity in letters. When she weighs whether or not to travel to Boston with her teacher Miss Torrington, for instance, Ivy writes a letter that provides insight into her dilemma. Ivy sees her Granny Rowe and Aunt Tennessee as she speaks with Miss Maynard, and later writes Silvaney:

I confess that for a minute I drew back, for here was Granny smoking her pipe and wearing her old mans hat, and Tennessee behind her giggling and clutching that filthy dirty crazy bead purse. I drew back. For all of a sudden they seemed to me strange people out of another time, I could not breath...And I was ashamed of myself. And I thought, If I go to Boston, I will not see them, nor Beaulahs new baby, nor Ethel grinning behind that big cash register (107).

Ivy recognizes here that her choice to go to Boston is not based on geography or education. Studying in Boston with the refined Miss Torrington will separate her, forever, from the uneducated, unsophisticated family and culture she has loved. As Locklear puts it, Ivy grapples, in passages such as this, with “her entry into a different social class and discourse community and also an awareness of the impending conflicted family relationships resulting from that transition” (Locklear 197). The tug-of-war between the community of her birth and the wider world runs through Ivy’s letters as she seeks to find her place in these very different realms. Ultimately, Ivy remains near her mountain homeland for her whole life, causing, as Locklear notes, “her literacy campaign [to operate] within her primary discourse community....While this allows Ivy to avoid the perils of attaining multiple literacies, it also limits her empowerment” (Locklear 203). Ivy doesn’t gain material advantage by her reading and writing; instead, she reaps the more abstract but important benefits of greater self-knowledge and connection to her family’s cultural and historical roots.

In her study of Appalachian women's literacies, Locklear provides useful analyses of Ivy's literacy and the problems and joys it creates in her life. She notes, primarily, that Ivy's writing "represents a blending of the oral and the literate that marks a progression in voice for [Smith's] readers." Unlike *Black Mountain Breakdown's* Crystal Spangler, whose story is written for her, or *Oral History's* Granny Younger, who speaks her story but does not write it, Ivy visually represents her own speech. Doing so allows her to privilege the oral even as she records it; by writing her letters in a voice that presumably resembles her spoken one, Ivy creates a written record imbued with the feeling and truth that Smith usually reserves for characters' oral narratives. For the first time, Smith's female protagonist is doing both the talking and the writing, providing, as Dorothy Dodge Robbins has observed, "an examination of an oral culture, not usurped by, but in transition to its written counterpart" (Robbins PAGE). Smith underscores the importance of Ivy's recording her own words early in the novel, when Ivy visits the house of her teacher, Mrs. Brown. Ivy avoids telling one of her favorite stories to Mrs. Brown's husband because, she says, "sometimes when I say things, Mister Brown writes them down in his notebook and then I feel like whatever I have said isn't mine any more, it's a funny feeling" (*FATL* 54). Ivy recognizes here that her family's stories lose an element of authenticity when recorded by a "foreigner," that these stories are meant to be shared orally, in the voice of someone from Ivy's mountains.

Although letters provide the structure for the entirety of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy frequently reminds readers – and herself – that they are important only while they are being created. When she is near death, for instance, Ivy burns piles of letters she has

saved. Explaining her actions to Joli, she writes, “The letters didn’t mean anything. Not to the dead girl Silvaney, of course – nor to me. Nor had they ever. It was the writing of them, that signified” (*FATL* 313). Long points out that by burning bundles of her letters, Ivy frees herself from written definition. This act, too, is consistent with Ivy’s awareness of the importance of the writing process itself, and with Smith’s promotion of private art as equal to its public counterparts. Burning insures that most of Ivy’s letters will never be published, or even read by others. “With every one I burned,” Ivy writes, “my soul grew lighter, lighter, as if it rose too with the smoke.” Ivy’s identity is tied to writing and self-expression, but not to the letters themselves.

Ivy’s letters are a place in which she creates and retells stories, and it is this specific function of self-expression that makes her writing necessary for her very survival.¹⁶ Sharing stories saves Ivy’s life in a literal sense. For instance, when Ivy, busy with five children and her home on Sugar Fork, stops writing her letters and feels the lack of a storyteller in her life, the effect of these absences on her is undeniably physical. “Nothing but skin and bones,” Ivy imagines herself “a dried up husk...leached out by hard work and babies” (*FATL* 187). The stories that Ivy hears fuel her own storytelling in letters, and her decisions about what kinds of stories to repeat are decisions that profoundly shape her life. While she adores and internalizes the folk tales of the Cline sisters, she gently critiques her daughter Joli’s, writing for its lack of a strong love story. “It was pretty good,” she writes, “although I think you could of used more of a love interest” (*FATL* 290). Ivy’s capacity for love and joy drives her interest in romance,

¹⁶ Smith has acknowledged this many times. In a 1990 interview with Irv Broughton, for instance, she says that *Fair and Tender Ladies* is “about writing as a way to make it through the night – or save your life, whatever” (80). Broughton, Irv. “Lee Smith.” *Conversations with Lee Smith*. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2001: 78-91.

which informs the original stories that she writes. By creating narratives about Silvaney, Honey Breeding, and others, she is better able to understand and to live within the often-difficult spaces of her life. Beginning with the story of her parents' elopement and their establishment of a home at Sugar Fork, Ivy infuses her letters with stories old and new.

Ivy learns to rely on storytelling for strength during her difficult childhood, during which she lives with her sickly, dying father and overworked, broken mother. After recording the story of her parents' marriage and arrival at Sugar Fork, Ivy writes, "Now I am glad I have set this all down for I can see my Momma and Daddy as young, and laghing. This is not how they are today" (*FATL* 14). Ivy benefits from reminders of the hopeful beginning her parents enjoyed; this strategy of recording or reciting familiar stories is one that Ivy frequently uses in her letters. As Hovis observes, it is Ivy's ability to "recreate the past, internalizing and reconfiguring it by means of alternative narratives of her life, rather than being overwhelmed by a static mythology located outside and beyond herself" that "indicates the nature of Ivy's triumph" (Hovis 167).

Hovis thoroughly examines Ivy's frequent referencing of her parents' story, calling it an attempt to make her own "creation myth." By adding her own details to her parents' story, he argues, Ivy "selectively refine[s] the details of the story and even invent[s] missing details to satisfy...psychological needs." For instance, when Ivy describes her heavy workload to Hanneke in a letter, she "turns what might seem a detriment into the defining attribute of Sugar Fork" (Hovis 168). Ivy describes her work in positive terms, explaining how "we grow nearabout all we eat....we raise what we

need, we don't go to the store for nothing but coffee and shoes and nails and to get the mail" (*FATL* 16). Hovis calls this description a testament to Ivy's reverence for values of "self-sufficiency and independence." These values connect Ivy with her mother, Maude, who often tells Ivy that she will not be beholden to anyone. They also fuel her appreciation of the story-telling Cline sisters, "maiden ladys" who live in a "dolly cabin with everything just so." When they visit Ivy's family to tell stories on Christmas night, Ivy writes, "Don't nobody know how they live exackly Daddy said, they do not farm nor raise a thing but beans and flowers...I think myself they live on storys, they do not need much food" (*FATL* 33). Ivy believes that the sisters magically are self-sufficient, exempt from the pain and suffering that comes with her own family's strategies for survival.

Ivy's magical thinking has a similar impact on readers of Smith's novel. Though the events of Ivy's life are often challenging and can be painful to read, her narration is so spirited that it sometimes obscures the tragedy that is on the page. When Ivy describes the death of Lonnie Rash, for instance, she addresses her pain, writing "Lonnie is dead in the war, it has upset me so! (*FATL* 146). However, she quickly turns her attention to describing baby Joli after mentioning Lonnie, writing "You ought to see Joli, she is so beautiful!" It is significant that Ivy makes these statements in a letter to Silvaney, from whom she hides nothing. Clearly, Ivy is not simply directing her letter to a happier subject out of consideration for her reader's happiness. In conversation with Silvaney, Ivy writes as she thinks, and is thus illustrating one of her coping strategies. Until she becomes depressed at age forty, Ivy possesses an infectious ability to smooth over the most difficult events of her life.

FEMALE IDENTITY AND HOME

Before its publication, *Fair and Tender Ladies* was titled *Letters from Home*.

Though the original title was less poetic than the eventual one, it referenced one of the novel's most distinguishing features, Ivy's permanent residence in the mountains of Southeastern Virginia. Ivy moves short distances within the mountains – to the town of Majestic, to a mining town called "Diamond," and, briefly, to a Bristol hospital – but she never lives far from her birthplace. Thus, all of her letters are drafted from the same small corner of Appalachia, though they make their way to destinations from Holland and Florida. Several factors contribute to Ivy's decision to remain in the mountains, many of which stem directly from the fact that Ivy is a woman, rather than a man. Despite an intense desire to travel, Ivy is yoked by children and circumstance and love to the family home on Sugar Fork. Though it is easy to see that Ivy's relative physical stasis is a limitation in her life, Smith often suggests that it actually strengthens Ivy's writing and her identity. As Eckard observes, Ivy's connection to the mountains is reflected in the structure of the novel, which is split into sections based on the places Ivy lives. "By creating an alignment between Ivy's female experiences and these various mountain locales," she writes, "Smith demonstrates how a woman's life is often inextricably bound to place and reveals the profound identification that Appalachian women share with their mountain surroundings" (Eckard 159).

Even as she remains near Sugar Fork, Ivy repeatedly underscores her keen interest in cultures and persons far from her Appalachian home. From her longing to communicate with her Dutch pen-pal, Hanneke, to her fascination with the ever-

traveling Honey Breeding, Ivy seeks new sources for information about the world. This curiosity has led critic Tena Helton to call Ivy a “conduit between mountain and outside cultures” who “overcomes an apparent lack to mobility, creating an integrated, ‘rooted’ identity by traveling through the stories of her home and by contact with outsiders and their cultural differences” (Helton 5). Helton’s observation supports Long and Hovis’s characterizations of Ivy’s identity as “fluid” and “postmodern,” respectively, as it implies that she merges diverse influences in the making of herself. Though Ivy is a permanent resident of Appalachia, her writing and her curiosity give her an understanding of the wider world.

Ivy’s fascination with places she thinks are more exciting than her mountain home leads her to consider living in one of those places. She imagines two scenarios: in one, she pursues her education with Gertrude Torrington in Boston; in the other, she takes off downriver with young men in the lumber industry. Though one of these trips is more practical than the other, Ivy’s hopes of both ventures are dashed because she is a girl. Her choice to sleep with Lonnie Rash leads to a pregnancy before she can depart for Boston, and she would never be allowed to join the young men on the river. As Debbie Wesley has written, however, Ivy’s inability to go to Boston is not necessarily a bad thing. “Ivy does not lose her art by losing Miss Torrington,” she argues, “who represents the kind of pretentious, institutionalized, isolated art that Smith wishes to avoid. Ivy continues to write her letters, and her pregnancy appears to feed her art rather than stifle it” (Wesley 93). By staying close to the stories with which she has grown up, Ivy avoids having her unique voice molded into something more conventional.

In a letter to Silvaney, Ivy addresses the other trip she longs to undertake, describing the journey that young men make downriver soon after her arrival in town. Tasked with moving lumber from Virginia to Kentucky, the men ride rafts of logs along the river before undertaking a four-day walk back to Majestic. "I wuld give anything to be one of them boys and ride the rafts down to Kentucky on the great spring tide," Ivy writes. "I have even thought of waring jeans and a boys shirt and shoes and trying to sneak along, but Momma and Geneva wuld have a fit" (*FATL* 91). Though Ivy sees opportunities for travel at this point in the novel, she is nevertheless conscious that this sort of rough trip is not something she can ever undertake. Ivy's inability to make this trip has less of an upside than her inability to travel to Boston. Rather than insulating her writing from the influence of formality, the forces that keep Ivy from the river merely limit her experience within the mountains, relegating her to activities and pursuits deemed suitable for a woman.

The degree to which Ivy's sex limits her mobility fluctuates as she ages. In Ivy's girlhood, for instance, her opportunities to travel tend to be tied to her desire to gain experience or education. She ventures to her teacher, Mrs. Brown's, house, then dreams of studying with Miss Torrington in Boston or exploring the river. Later in Ivy's life, though, her chances to leave mountain life depend more on her relationships with men: she refuses a wild life with Franklin Ransom, she is denied a nomadic life with Honey Breeding, and she rejects her late sister's husband, Curtis Bostick, when he begs her to go off and marry him. The exception to this pattern is when Ivy is invited to the wedding of her daughter, Joli, in eastern Virginia, but even then, it is Oakley who dissuades her from attending. "Oakley does not feel up to the trip, plain and simple," she

writes Silvaney, he “feels we ought not to go, and in my heart of hearts I know he is right” (*FATL* 268). Ivy will not travel with men like Franklin and Curtis, and she cannot travel with the men she would like to, Honey or Oakley. In her old age, when Ivy is encouraged by many to leave Sugar Fork and has the flexibility to do so, she instead feels compelled to remain there. “I am old and crazy,” she writes to Silvaney, “I have a need to be up here on this mountain again and sit looking out as I look out now at the mountains” (*FATL* 301).

The societal and familial expectations that keep Ivy close to Sugar Fork as a young woman are eventually more forcefully imposed by Ivy’s responsibilities as a wife to Oakley and a mother to her many children. Ivy does not avoid travel and adventure only because they seem inappropriate: her access to such experience is limited by the necessity that she care for her family’s home and nurse her children, much as her own mother, Maude, did years earlier. “I must of knowed it from childhood,” Ivy writes to Silvaney, describing how hard the work of raising a family and farming at Sugar Fork is, “from watching it kill Daddy first, then Momma. But that is the thing about being young – you never think that what happened to anybody else might happen to you, too” (*FATL* 201). Ivy explicitly acknowledges that the life she has chosen prevents her from traveling much. She writes: “I never get out and go places any more, Silvaney. A woman just can’t go off and leave so many children...it seems like I don’t want to do a thing when I’m not working, except rest” (*FATL* 195).

Thus, Ivy’s womanhood doesn’t just prevent her from leaving home; it also impedes her exploration of the place where she lives. Ivy emphasizes this again decades

after she is unable to pilot logs down the river. When Ivy and Honey Breeding climb to the very top of Blue Star Mountain, where she has lived for most of 40 years, Ivy writes:

All of a sudden I thought, I could of climbed up here by myself, anytime! But I had not. I remembered as girls how you and me would beg to go hunting on the mountain, Silvaney, but they said, That is for boys. Or how we wanted to go up there after berries and they'd say, Wait till Victor can take you, or Wait till Daddy gets home....And I had got up there myself at long last with a man it is true, but not a man like any I had ever seen before in all my life (233).

As spirited and independent as she often is, Ivy has never taken the initiative to climb Blue Star herself, but feels empowered when she finally ascends the peak with Honey. "I felt giddy and crazy climbing the mountain," she writes Silvaney, "It seemed I was dropping years as I went, letting them fall there beside the trace, leaving them all behind me" (*FATL* 224). This passage is similar to the one in which Ivy burns her letters: both experiences leave her feeling lighter. Though she ultimately cannot leave her mountain home behind, climbing higher than her earlier personal history, and doing something she was told she could not because of her gender, are cathartic and healing for her.

Despite her desire to be relieved of the heavier aspects of her past, Ivy continues to cultivate her ties to family and home. As Hovis observes, her residence at her childhood home is self-perpetuating. "Ivy remains geographically rooted at Sugar Fork," he writes, reinvesting the landscape with memories of her family and making it ever harder to leave" (Hovis 167). By eking out a life at Sugar Fork even after Oakley's passing, Ivy continues what has become something of a family tradition for the women to whom she is related. Granny Rowe, Aunt Tennessee, Virgie and Gaynelle Cline, and Ivy's mother, Maude, all attempt to maintain their lives in Ivy's mountains without the

help of men, with varying degrees of success.¹⁷ In this way, Ivy's family history is a matrilineal one, centered on home and stories and love, which Ivy feels bound to continue. "The water is still as cold and as pure as it ever was," Ivy writes upon her return to Sugar Fork with Oakley, "it tastes as good as it did to Momma when she and Daddy stopped to drink, riding Lightning" (187). Helton has called Ivy's decision to make her home on Sugar Fork a "search for connection with her mother," whose external life her own so resembles" (Helton 10). Helton persuasively argues that although Ivy sets out to follow her father's example – farming, telling stories, appreciating the land – her lot is more like her mother's, characterized by the hard work of bearing and sustaining many children on a rural homestead.

Ivy's association of Sugar Fork with the women who have preceded her in the mountains is also influenced by her relationship with her sister Silvaney, who was institutionalized before Ivy's move to Majestic. Silvaney is no longer at Sugar Fork when Ivy returns, but, as Hill has written, she is strongly associated with it by her name and her behavior. "Silvaney's name evokes woodland spirits," Hill writes, and "that part of the female self that is all shimmering, vulnerable light and tenderness" (Hill 108). When Ivy is at Sugar Fork, she has to face the creek where she found her brother Babe dead, and the chest where her late mother's "berrying quilt" lies. But she is also close to her memories of Silvaney, functions as a sort of "double" for Ivy even after Silvaney's death. While memories themselves are significant, Ivy's need for Silvaney is more than

¹⁷ Of these women, Maude is the only one who readers know dies at a young age. Maude dies in the Majestic town boarding house where she and Ivy have lived; the others remain near Sugar Fork until they are dead or at least quite old. Unlike the other women, Maude professes not to enjoy the traditional Appalachian stories and rituals that Ivy so loves.

sentimental. As Kearns argues, “Silvaney is a conduit to carry away madness, the sacrificial figure who remains necessary for the female artist to survive. Thus exorcised, Ivy may accommodate the world without going mad” (Kearns 190).

If Silvaney saves Ivy from madness, Ivy’s experiences with motherhood and loss nearly drive her into it. During her first pregnancy, Ivy feels “helplessly bound to her body and place,” and imagines that she is trapped, trying to escape, in her own womb (Locklear 202). She stops feeling entrapped after Joli is born, but the feeling returns once Ivy has married Oakley and returned to Sugar Fork. She is pregnant for most of her twenties, bearing babies both live and stillborn. Both sorts bind her deeply to Sugar Fork. She must care for the living – six of her own, plus a friend’s daughter and eventually a grandson – and tread the ground where the dead lie. “Now I have got two little babies on Pilgrim Knob,” Ivy writes Silvaney, “I never gave them a name. But I remember losing them and getting them both, I remember everything” (*FATL* 203). Though Ivy loves her children, her responsibilities and sad memories leave her in a damaged place; “marriage and repeated childbearing,” Eckard notes, “impose silence and a loss of language” (Eckard 169). Ivy does not write for years at a time, and the effect of her loss of language and expression is palpable. Her youngest nursing baby seems to be “sucking [her] life right out of [her], and she feels lost in a “great soft darkness” (*FATL* 194). Dark as it is, Ivy’s depression gives her a better understanding of her own mother, Maude, and briefly reconnects her with her father’s mother, Granny Rowe, who tries to build up Ivy’s strength. When neither connection is enough to save her, though, Ivy turns again to Silvaney, to whom she writes “with a vengeance.” As

Eckard observes Ivy “uses her letters to Silvaney as a way to write out of the body, out of the darkness and fatigue in which she has been immersed” (Eckard 170).

What ultimately pulls Ivy out of her depression is her restorative affair with Honey Breeding. “It is like I’ve had an electric shock,” she writes Silvaney. “For the first time, I know, I am on fire” (210). When Ivy climbs Blue Star Mountain with him, she has language and sexuality both restored to her. Parrish explains this restoration when she writes, “Honey’s storytelling enriches Ivy’s existence by helping her hear – not the silence of a black oblivion – but the stories that are in her ‘very own head’” (Parrish 119). Ivy’s attention to the sound of her own voice underscores this point. Though she delights in listening to Honey Breeding’s stories, she is most amazed by her own voice, which “sounded funny in [her] ears. It sounded rusty” (*FATL* 224). Ivy returns from her escape with Honey Breeding with renewed command of that voice, and a new ability to balance her responsibilities as a mother with invigorating sexuality. However, Kearns argues that “while, for Ivy, finally, maternity and art are mutually generative, Smith’s compromise remains as always before in the direction of maternal selfishness” (Kearns 192). Ivy’s daughter, Lulda, suddenly dies while Ivy is away with Honey Breeding, an event that Ivy – and her community – cannot help but connect with her absence. Ivy grieves Lulda’s death, but, as Hovis points out, she “does not sink to the depths of self-absorption and abstraction that she had reached before her affair with Honey Breeding” (Hovis 175).

Ivy is the first protagonist in a Lee Smith novel to provide an in-depth description of her experiences with pregnancy and young motherhood as they happen; she also is among the first mothers in Smith’s fiction to narrate her own story. After

presenting appearance-obsessed mothers in her first four novels, and mostly voiceless mothers in *Oral History* and *Family Linen*, Smith finally, as Eckard argues, finds “a discourse that is close to the maternal body, one that replicates the natural cadences of life, language, and female bodily experience” (Eckard 173). Smith draws on Ivy to fictionalize motherhood again in *The Christmas Letters* and, especially, *On Agate Hill*. Still, the immediacy and impact of Ivy’s maternal story are unique in Smith’s fiction.

SPIRITUALITY, SEXUALITY, AND THAT OLD-TIME RELIGION

Ivy’s identification with her mountain homeland also extends to her spiritual life. The tension between traditional religious experience and the elemental, naturalistic spirituality of Lee Smith’s treatment of her mountains frequently arises in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Never a true believer in the traditional Christian faith as presented to her by instructors, evangelists, and her husband, Ivy instead finds comfort and fulfillment in the land that surrounds her. Water, in all its forms, proves especially evocative for Ivy, a woman who lives without ever seeing the ocean; at difficult or poignant moments in her life, Ivy often feels comforted by the glint of light from an icicle or from water beaded on leaves. As she reflects on spirituality in her letters, Ivy records the moments when it intersects with sexuality in ways discomfiting and sublime. In an interview with Susan Ketchin, Lee Smith explained how Ivy’s difficulty accepting the tenets of Christianity was influenced by Smith’s own experience. “Ivy is like me,” she said, “unable to find a religion that suits her – and organized religion. She

makes up her own. Writing for her is sort of like it has been for me – a sort of a saving thing. Almost a religion of its own (Ketchin 163).

Though Ivy frequently changes her mind about some subjects, she consistently expresses her disillusionment with Christianity. At twelve, she assertively states her feelings about the Christian God in a letter to Mrs. Brown. “I do not pray, nor do I think much of God,” Ivy writes, “It is not right what he sends on people. He sends too much to bare” (*FATL* 39). Reeling from the death of her father, Ivy does not deny the existence of God; instead, she proclaims her disappointment in his behavior. Later, she has cause for disappointment in the men who claim to represent God’s interest. The Christian evangelists with whom Ivy speaks are uniformly scoundrels, traveling men whose fervent sermons are matched in intensity only by their hypocrisy. Sam Russell Sage, the first evangelist she encounters, accepts money from Ivy’s wealthy grandfather in exchange for burying her mother on his land, instead of near Sugar Fork as she had wished. Ivy’s self-important brother Garnie is no better, cruelly blaming Ivy for the death of her daughter LuIda before attempting to whip her with his belt. “If Sam Russell Sage is who God has sent,” Ivy writes Silvaney, “then I don’t know if I even want to be saved either, in spite of the firey hand!” (*FATL* 102). Ivy connects Christianity to the domineering and patriarchal behavior of the men who preach it in her community.

Still, Ivy does not generally condemn or disdain practitioners of Christianity. She respects the faith of her husband Oakley, and enjoys reading from the little white Bible left behind by Garnie. “I go to church with Oakley sometimes,” she writes, and “it is the only time I ever see a break in the lines of his face” (*FATL* 247). In her final letter, she intersperses lines from Ecclesiastes with memories and visions from her life. Ivy enjoys

the poetry in portions of the Bible even as she denies the centrality of its tenets in her life; Language, as it so often does for her, bridges two elements that she otherwise struggles to reconcile. "Ecclesiastes is good and makes sense," Ivy writes, "I like to read Ecclesiastes and run my hand along the fine-grained wood of this deer that Oakley cut out of a poplar stump, it makes me think I am close to him" (*FATL* 302). In passages such as this, Ivy mixes words from the Bible with emotions grounded in her life and with material taken from the land that is so important in her own version of spirituality.

Though Ivy often lacks the vocabulary to write it, she sees implicit connections between religious fervor and sexual excitement. She first makes the connection as a teenager in Majestic, where she lives in a boarding house and observes Sage, the pious evangelist, bedding her mother's friend. Ivy feels "the firey hand of God clutching [her] in the stomach" during one of Sage's sermons, and initially interprets this feeling as a sign from God that she should be saved. She changes her mind, though, after learning about Sage's womanizing and beginning an affair of her own with Lonnie Rash: Ivy "let him put his tonge way down in [her] mouth and the firey hand grabbed [her] for good" (*FATL* 103). Having experienced the same feeling when sexually and spiritually aroused, Ivy decides that the firey hand actually is a warning from God that she is "bad" (*FATL* 95). Here, Ivy echoes the moral confusion of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). As H.H. Campbell notes, Jane, too, feels "'a hand of fiery iron'" when "undergoing her ordeal of deciding whether or not to leave Rochester" (Campbell 141). Ivy's confusion is only compounded when her Presbyterian missionary teacher, Miss Torrington, kisses her. Ivy has sex with Lonnie Rash for the first time immediately after the kiss, but ultimately rejects his claim to her, as well as Miss Torrington's.

Ivy saves the devotion that she refuses Christianity for the mountain landscape she inhabits. In the same letter in which she expresses disappointment in God about her father's death, Ivy describes the walk to her father's gravesite:

It was the softest palest prettiest morning. Everything smelt so new because of the rain, it was like Genesis in the Bible...Somehow in the pale perly ligt these apple trees seemed the prettest I have ever seed them, and smelled the sweetest, and this on the day we berried my daddy wich shuld of been the worstest in my life, but somehow it was not (48).

In the natural world, Ivy finds the comfort that she does not find through prayer or salvation by God, and she explicitly recognizes that her surroundings are part of something divine. By comparing the trip to bury her father to "Genesis in the Bible," Ivy shows how her mountains make her "feel like church," a turn of phrase she uses later in life to describe breakfast with her family. Ivy adapts the language of Christianity to harness the feelings the natural world inspires in her.

Ivy associates many of these poignant moments with water, in all its states of matter. As Bennett has written, water "can work to create a sort of transcendental moment for Ivy" (Bennett 80). As with the rain on the day of her father's burial, ice impacts her mood and outlook on the world. "The whole world was news," she thinks, looking out on an icy morning, "and it was like I was the onliest person that had ever looked upon it, and it was mine" (*FATL* 18). Like Ivy, who writes that she has "been so many people" in her life, water is changeable yet constant, able to convert to different states while retaining its basic identity as water. Ivy appreciates water when she sees it, and yearns for it when she cannot access it, as when the young men pilot logs downriver from Majestic. "The river is brown and swirly," Ivy writes Silvaney, "it has waves and foams up the bank" (*FATL* 91). Though this description is not as alluring as

Ivy's writing about rainy mornings or glittering ice, Ivy is drawn to the water in it, anyway. The possibilities it offers capture her imagination, even when they are murky.

Though Ivy never makes a trip down the river, she does gain greater knowledge of her spiritual self through traveling her mountains. Her climb to the top of Blue Star with Honey Breeding, for instance, helps her to recognize her own agency, power, and spirit, things she had forgotten among the chaos and exhaustion of childrearing. Interestingly, her time with Honey Breeding may also be the only time that Ivy places something above the landscape in terms of its sacred value to her. As Hovis argues, Honey's presence "becomes so real to [Ivy] that he obscures the landscape," an event that Ivy believes leads to the death of her daughter, Lulda. "Ivy has replaced her mother's narrative of Edenic harmony with the figure of Honey Breeding," Hovis argues, "and a new story in which Ivy leaves her family to pursue her own private fantasy (Hovis 175).

Ivy's story about Honey Breeding is just one of many that she adds to her collection of sacred, mostly oral, texts about her homeland. The story of Whitebear Whittington, for instance, reoccurs to Ivy throughout the novel, and even colors her feelings toward some of the people whom she meets. Though Whitebear, a handsome man by night and a bear by day, calls Honey Breeding to mind – he wanders the mountains, roaming the hills for seven years while his beloved searches for him – Ivy also associates the story of Whitebear with her "wild" uncle, Revel Rowe. "When I grow up and become a writer," Ivy says, "I will write of a man like my uncle Revel who can come like a storm in the night and knock a born lady off her feet" (*FATL* 80). A mule-trader by day, Revel is a ladies man and "antic" by night, a drinker of whiskey, a

storyteller, and a musician.¹⁸ Ivy evokes Revel in her final letter as she describes Whitebear Whittington: “He lives there even now I tell you and he is wild, wild. He runs thogh the night with his eyes on fire and no one can take him” (*FATL* 315). Though Ivy builds her life with the stable, Christian, Oakley, she feels a deep connection with dangerous, passionate men like Honey, Revel, and the fictional Whitebear.

Ivy’s mountain spiritualism also has associated rituals to accompany its mythology and stories. When Ivy is experiencing postpartum depression, the ancient-seeming Granny Rowe takes her hunting in the mountains for iron-rich greens to eat. “You have got to purify your blood,” Granny tells Ivy (*FATL* 195). Although there is a scientific reason that greens are beneficial for a woman like Ivy, Granny doesn’t know about it; she knows the ritual and its effect, and passes it along to Ivy so that she, too, can perform it. Prajznerova has pointed out that many of the medicinal plants whose utility Granny Rowe extolls are also important in Cherokee culture, which references a mythology in which “preserving natural balance in the world” is crucial” (Praj. 35). As Ivy upholds some of her community’s nature-based practices, she also adds to them by taking steps to preserve Sugar Fork. Beginning when she witnesses the abuse that mining companies inflict on her land and their employees, Ivy stands against commercial invasion of her sacred space. she puts a “No Trespassing” sign on her land to prevent the Peabody Coal Company from mining it; when the “bulldozer man” ignores her sign, she threatens him at gunpoint until he departs (*FATL* 306). Ivy’s

¹⁸ Though his role in the novel is limited, Revel’s existence offers some insight on the difficulty of artistry for a man in Ivy’s world. Like Ivy, he is a born storyteller, but he is also a talented musician. These interests, and a penchant for women and drink, lead Revel into unstable careers such as mule-trading, and prevent him from staying in one place for long.

devotion to the land is poetic but not just abstract. At novel's end, Ivy and Dreama Fox, Oakley's sister, live alone in the house on Sugar Fork. Ivy's children live in others places, and her siblings are also dead or dispersed. There is a sense that when Ivy leaves Sugar Fork – and her departure is almost certainly imminent as she writes her last letter – the mountain home will simply cease to exist, at least in the day-to-day lives of Ivy's family.

Though Ivy's home and letters will have ceased to exist by the time of her death, there is hope within Smith's intratextual narrative that some of what Ivy stood for and sought to preserve will live on. By novel's end, Ivy's daughter Joli has become the author that Ivy long wished to be, and, much to her mother's chagrin, she writes of Appalachia. Joli should, according to Ivy, write about New York instead of "these mountains which nobody wants to read about" (*FATL* 290). Ivy does not recognize the artistry of her life, private as it has been and is likely to remain. But, as Smith suggests in other fiction – "Cakewalk," and "The Happy Memories Club," particularly – Ivy's unread letters and authentically-lived life constitute art in their own right. With Ivy, Smith created a protagonist for whom mirrors are a thing of beauty rather than fear. As Kearns puts it, Ivy illustrates "the metamorphosis in Smith's fiction from anxiety and ambivalence to empowerment and from there to self-documentation, with its implicit valuation of its subject" (Kearns 193).

“Old Crazy Stories One More Time”: *Family Linen* to *The Last Girls*

After the 1983 publication of *Oral History*, Lee Smith’s profile as a writer was raised. The novel was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, bolstering Smith’s readership and reputation as a widely read author. She had similar levels of popular success with 1988’s *Fair and Tender Ladies* and 2001’s *The Last Girls*, and also published frequently in the years between their publications. The works Smith debuted then, which include novels such as *Devil’s Dream* (1993) and *Saving Grace* (1995), and short stories in the collections *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* (1990) and *News of the Spirit* (1997), though less critically lauded than her most admired books, are creative successes that lend further definition to Smith’s career. She addresses a diverse variety of subjects within them – rural Pentecostalism, the history of country music, and motherhood are just a few – but the works are tied together by Smith’s characteristic channeling of character’s nuanced voices and, usually, weaving together of multiple perspectives to create a fully realized story. In a positive sense of the word, Smith’s novels published after 1981’s *Black Mountain Breakdown* are formulaic. She applied similar literary strategies to vastly different worlds, refining a style that continues to define her career.

Smith’s novels of the past three decades are more ambitious in scope than many of her earlier works, but also more specific and localized in terms of their settings.

Whereas Smith allowed that the plot of *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968), for instance, could be set in “any small town,” the external spaces inhabited by Smith’s characters are more distinctive and influential in her later works. Usually, this setting is the mountains of Virginia or North Carolina, although characters occasionally venture to the coast or other southern states. “It wasn’t until *Black Mountain Breakdown*,” Smith has said, “that I decided to really write about the mountains” (Arnold 3). Since the publication of that novel in 1981, every novel Smith has published has been set in the mountains, whether wholly, as in 1988’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, or partially, as in 2006’s Civil War-era *On Agate Hill*. Though the exception to this is the 1996 novella *The Christmas Letters*, even that work contains references to a character’s mountain past: its first narrator, Birdie, charts her adjustment from a childhood deep in the mountains to her new life in coastal North Carolina. By more fully developing the settings of her novels, Smith has solidified her literary connection to Appalachia, and also found space to use a wealth of stories, songs, and anecdotes from her homeland. In particular, her most recent novel, *On Agate Hill* (2006) is built upon extensive historical research that Smith completed mostly in North Carolina libraries and museums.

Though Smith’s literary move to the contemporary and historical mountains makes sense from a career-centric standpoint, it is tied, too, to many of the events in Smith’s personal life. Smith’s writing from the 1980’s onward especially was shaped by her divorce and remarriage, by the losses of her parents and her son, Josh, and by immense changes in her hometown of Grundy. As Nancy Parrish writes, Smith “realized only in retrospect that *Black Mountain Breakdown* was really about the breakup of her first marriage. Similarly, she has observed that she wrote *Fair and Tender Ladies* to

create a role model for herself when she was facing difficulties with her teenage sons and the impending death of her mother” (Parrish 169).

Writing intensely personal novels put Smith in touch with the Grundy, which was, itself, under siege. Smith discussed her anger at the instability of her hometown in a 1991 interview, describing how the mining of lumber and coal around her hometown left it vulnerable to natural disaster. “Right before I started writing *Oral History* there was another one of those horrible floods...I think it is going to be a ghost town in a hundred years....That is why I feel so strongly about having a record of all that has been” (Herion 97). In addition to her fiction, which includes details about Grundy and areas like it, Smith sought to memorialize her fading hometown by editing an oral history of Grundy, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* (2000). Smith’s own introduction to the book, in which she relates childhood memories of Grundy, underscores her dedication to preserving the town’s character by recording its vernacular. “In this book we are simply telling our own stories in our own words,” she writes, “in the belief that our voices will blend to create a vibrant testimony to the life of this whole community” (*Sitting* 18). As in her fiction, Smith privileges oral testimony in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*.

Aside from formal experimentation, Smith’s later works are tied together by shared themes. Smith expanded her exploration of religious ideas during the 1990’s, especially, bringing to the forefront a theme that previously had played a strong supporting role in her fiction. In the short story “Tongues of Fire,” for instance, the narrator Karen recounts the year that she became saved, turning to a rural church as her father has a “nervous breakdown” and her mother works to “keep up appearances.”

Like Crystal Spangler in *Black Mountain Breakdown* and Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Karen is enticed by a charismatic preacher with a movie star name: Johnny Rock Malone. “It was a wipeout,” she recalls, “I felt as fluttery and wild as could be” (*Eclipse* 81). What differentiates Karen from Smith’s earlier protagonists, though, is the long-term effect of her connection to God. Within a year of her many baptisms, Karen stops speaking in tongues and becomes a cheerleader, following what she describes as a fairly conventional life path. For decades afterward, though, Karen, unlike Crystal or Ivy, wishes for and half-expects God to speak to her, again. “I catch myself still listening for that voice,” she confesses. “‘Karen,’ He will say, and I’ll say, ‘Yes, Lord. Yes’” (*Eclipse* 116).

In *Saving Grace*, published six years after “Tongues of Fire,” God does return to the life of another of Smith’s narrators, Grace Shepherd. Raised by a wild and unstable evangelist father and a loving but tormented mother, Grace leaves the Pentecostal faith of her childhood as a young woman, only to return to it years later. Grace comes back to God when she finds a way to reconcile her mother’s gentleness and devotion with Christianity, which she previously saw as a patriarchal institution. She dreams she hears her mother’s voice: “‘Come to me, Gracie,’ she says. ‘Oh come to Jesus honey. It is time now, it is never too late’” (*SG* 269). Through Grace’s story, Smith unifies femininity with Christianity for the first time in her fiction. Grace’s story also connects religion with sexuality, a tie that Smith explored in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, *Fair and Tender Ladies* and again in *On Agate Hill*. In the works discussed in this chapter, though, Smith frequently revisits a striking sexual motif: female characters in *Saving Grace*, *Family Linen*, *The Devils Dream*, and *The Last Girls*, as well as “The Bubba Stories” and “Live

Bottomless" (both from *News of the Spirit*) are infatuated with men who are either their brothers or brother figures. This motif, as the critic Martha Billips observes, is characterized by a "vulnerable young girl seduced (or raped) by a slightly older brother or brother figure (Billips 129). Though these brother figures are not always aggressive or even aware of their sister's interest, Smith's inclusion of them suggests sexual disruption in the domestic sphere.

Domestic disruption sometimes leads to mental illness, which is also frequently present in characters from *Family Linen* to *The Last Girls*. Generalized anxiety and depression are the most common of these illnesses for Smith's characters. In "Tongues of Fire," for instance, Karen's father collapses in tears on the golf course, while Baby Ballou of *The Last Girls* attempts suicide in her dorm room. Smith's most focused examination of mental illness, though, is in *Family Linen*. That novel, which opens with Sybill Hess's visit to a hypnotist, revolves around repressed and (literally) buried memories. When Fay, a twenty-five year old woman who has always been "off," believes her rapist, Jewell Rife, is planning to run away to Florida without her, she kills and buries him; months later, she delivers his baby. Jewell is another of Smith's sexualized brother figures, married as he is to Fay's prim sister, Elizabeth. Afterward, Fay's other sister Nettie recalls, Fay "was quieter than ever, and crazier – more confused" (*FL* 250). Fay's mental deterioration is brought on by events in her life that impact her extended family, but she ultimately is the most affected. While her family members show signs of improved lives by the novel's end, Fay is found dead, enclosed in a hot car that she believed would take her to Florida, and Jewell. Like Silvaney in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Fay is a sort of sad sacrifice, burdened so her family can survive.

In *Family Linen*, *The Christmas Letters*, and *The Last Girls*, Smith also provides a more nuanced examination of community and social class than in the first decade of her career. While Smith's first novels described young women's feelings of restriction and repression by societal norms, her later novels take a long view of class issues, examining consequences for characters of all ages. In general, characters who follow their inclinations with little regard for community censure are disorganized and financially insecure. They tend, though, to be happier and more sexually satisfied than their counterparts who are consumed with proper appearances. However, even characters who worry about upholding the standards of their social classes occasionally find happy outcomes in Smith's 1985-2001 novels. In *The Christmas Letters*, for instance, Mary Copeland adjusts to divorce from her wealthy husband, Sandy, by taking classes at the local college, finding a supportive community of female friends, and joining the Peace Corps in her fifties. While other characters who long to defy convention do not always do so – Courtney of *The Last Girls* gives up her affair to maintain her unfulfilling marriage – the sense of possibility is always there.

RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION

The Devil's Dream is a novel primarily about music and family. Musical talent passes from generation to generation within the Bailey family, leading many of them into the business of country music. The trajectory of the novel – from fiddling on the front porches of secluded mountain homes to playing the Grand Ole Opry – is undergirded, however, by the conflict between good-time music and old-time religion.

The union of Kate Malone's family of musicians with Moses Bailey's primitive Baptist roots begets a tension that never leaves their descendants. Tensions of the Bailey family sort underlie many of Smith's novels. With *Saving Grace*, however, Smith structured an entire narrative around a similar conflict. While Grace isn't cultivating a musical talent, she finds that there is no room for her sexual desires and theological curiosity in the faith of her evangelist father. Through Grace's story, which she narrates as an adult, Smith writes specifically about ways for a woman to maintain her individuality and femininity while also embracing Christianity. While she introduced the difficult overlap between Christianity and sexuality in novels as early as in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, that overlap is grounds for greater choice and possibility in the novels from *Family Linen* to *The Last Girls*.

The limits that Christian characters place on artistry in Smith's novels are not only imposed by men. Though Kate Malone is forbidden from playing her fiddle by her husband, Moses Bailey, her great-great-granddaughter Katie Cocker encounters religious-based opposition to her music from her mother, Alice Bailey. Alice, according to Katie, "said flat-out that there was *no way* she was going to ever consent to me trying to be a singer...for she was convinced that most singing was a sin" (*Dream* 211). The difference between Moses Bailey's restrictions and Alice Bailey's, though, is that Moses seeks to control his wife, while Alice's impulse is to protect her daughter. Moses's need for control is revealed through his actions when Kate defies him and plays the fiddle with her son, Jeremiah. "One side of Kate's pretty face was black and blue," her neighbor Ira, says, "and her eye was swole [sic] shut" (*Dream* 29). Not all male religious authorities in Smith's fiction are violent when disobeyed, but Moses – whose fury leads

to Jeremiah's death – is not the only one. Ivy Rowe's brother, Garnett, attempts to whip her with his belt for her disbelief, and Grace Shepherd's father succeeds in doing the same to her when she helps her sick brother get medical treatment instead of faith healing. "Daddy...whipped me with his belt until I bled," Grace recalls (*SG* 64). Virgil's violence toward his family is mirrored by his belief in pain as an expression of faith. He is said to have survived over two hundred snakebites, and he occasionally drinks poison and fasts. Because of his control over his family, Grace, her siblings, and her mother, often suffer along with Virgil.

Alice Bailey, on the other hand is drawn to religion because it seems to offer her protection, and to give her an identity within her musical family. Unlike most of her aunts, uncles, and cousins, Alice does not perform as a musician. As a girl, she feels special when she is allowed to go with relatives to listen to a Grand Ole Opry radio broadcast: "I felt like a part of my family too, and a part of that music they loved so. See, they always left us behind when they went off someplace to sing. I didn't hardly know Mamma at all" (*Dream* 115). Reserved by nature, Alice usually feels that music further marginalizes her and keeps her from connecting with her family. By turning to Christianity, Alice gains access to a church community in which she fits in, but she also gains a framework for dealing with a world of which she is scared. "Honey, you don't know what's out there," she tells Katie when her daughter goes on the road as a performer. "Out in the world...you just don't know, honey, what all a girl can get into" (*Dream* 214). Alice has been wounded by her abusive, alcoholic husband, and remains terrified of physical contact.

Katie eventually embraces Christianity herself, but she believes that she resisted it for so long because of Alice. As Bennett observes, "Katie's religion is different from her mother's. It is a more primary experience than Alice's seems to be" (Bennett 91). Katie's conversion is an intensely sensual moment that is rooted in the bodily pleasures of which Alice is so wary. "I could feel my pain rushing up from all over my body," she says, "feel the shock when it hit the air, feel it shatter and blow away...Then I felt God come into me, right into me through the mouth, like a long cool drink of water." While Alice's faith is based on abstinence and restraint, Katie's is almost decadent. "What my God says to me is *Yes! Yes!*" Katie says, "instead of *No! No!* which is all God ever said to anybody up on Chicken Rise." Although it is refreshing, Smith cannily suggests that Katie's enabling variety of Christianity is due in part to her celebrity as a country music artist. After the death of her true love, Ralph Handy, Katie is approached by a minister named Billy Jack Reems. Billy Jack promises relief from her pain, and, soon, Katie is attending "The Hallelujah Congregation" with "a lot of us in the music business." Katie's sense of peace in the church is real, but so is the money she and her fellow artists donate to move the church from a YMCA into a "new Building for Celebration" (*Dream* 298).

Katie's reasons for being saved are almost exactly the reverse of Grace Shepherd's. For Grace, Christianity is a path back to her mother, instead of a path she pursues in spite of her mother. While Virgil deprives his children of material goods and leaves them for months at a time, Grace's mother, Fanny, practices a gentler faith. "'The Lord will provide,'" she tells Grace, "smoothing [her] long yellow hair and pressing [her] against her bosom" (*SG* 3). Fanny's doctrine is accompanied by physical warmth, which

comforts her children when they are uncertain about their father's actions. Her devotion to Virgil, though, keeps her from being an effective advocate for her children. When Virgil is present, Fanny enforces his will, even raising a heavy cooking pot to strike her oldest son when he defies her husband. When they argue, however, as they do when one of his mistresses visits the house, she becomes distant and tense, "like a piece of bowed wire" (*SG* 88). Grace loses her mother to despair and eventual suicide, but continues to yearn for her love.

Fannie's suicide is motivated by her guilt over having sex with Lamar, who likely is Virgil's child. Her action is transgressive both because she commits adultery and because it is with her husband's own son. Although Fannie does not live to know it, her situation is further complicated by the fact that Lamar also has seduced Grace and her sister Billie Jean, both his half-sisters. The damage that Lamar wreaks in his quest to punish Virgil is immense. By the time he leaves Scrabble Creek, Fanny is dead, Billie is pregnant, and Grace blames herself. "I felt dirty," she recalls. "Nasty. Mama would still be alive today if it wasn't for me" (*SG* 115). Grace's guilt colors her feelings about sex, and propels her further from her parents' brand of Christianity.

It is only when Grace is thirty-seven and preparing for her second divorce that she returns to Scrabble Creek and again feels connected to Fanny. Debra Druesedow describes her journey: "She is drawn to the place of her childhood to remember, to reflect, to find what she has been missing to tell; thus, the narrative circles back to the frame and to the present" (Druesedow 77). At the family's old house, she sleeps in her mother's bed before donning one of Fanny's old dresses. Suddenly, Grace feels the presence of God in the same way that Fanny did: "I will let my hands do what they are

drawing now to do and it does not hurt, it is a joy in the Lord as she said. It is a joy which spreads all through my body, all through this sinful old body of mine" (SG 271). The "she" whom Grace mentions is, of course, Fanny, whom she is emulating by grasping hot coals from the woodstove in her hands. By adopting her mother's behavior in her childhood home, Grace, as Joan Hall has written, "'knows' herself because mother and daughter, past and present, heaven and earth are miraculously united" (Hall 85). Rebecca Smith puts it more concretely when she argues that, in *Saving Grace*, Smith "create[s] female characters who can move beyond the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society and a patriarchal religion, who can find identity and spiritual fulfillment because God speaks to them in an feminine voice" (R. Smith 11).

Smith retraces familiar ground when she has Grace conflate religious passion with sexual passion. Ostwalt describes how Grace and Lamar first have sex at a revival: she "gets swept away by the emotionally charged event, and finds herself in the backseat of her father's car with Lamar, transferring the 'butterflies' (102) in her stomach and 'the general fever of that night' (106) into sexual passion" (Ostwalt 110). Grace makes the connection between religion and sex even more literal after she begins an affair with Randy Newhouse; she says, "I thought I had been born again" (225). What is new in *Saving Grace*, though, is the degree of religious guilt and shame that the somber pastor Travis Word feels when he has sex with Grace, whom he marries after her father abandons her. After their first time, Travis begs Grace to pray with him. "Nothing would satisfy him," Grace recalls, "but for me to get down then and there on my knees too, both of us buck naked, as he quoted from Romans about our sinful passions working in our members to bear fruit for death. He was attempting to purify

us" (SG 188). Travis's behavior after sex never changes. It always is linked to God, and always in a painful, repentant way. Even after conceiving three children with Grace, Travis, as Cook argues, "views the human body as symbol of imperfection, corruption, and base physicality" (Cook 170). Partly because she cannot express herself sexually with Travis, Grace ultimately leaves him for another man.

Grace's relationship with Lamar is just one of many in Smith's fiction between a young woman and a man who is like a brother to her. These relationships range from relatively benign – Charlene of "The Bubba Stories" invents a wild brother to impress her college friends – to highly damaging, as is Grace's and Lamar's. Billips outlines the general concerns that sexually-tinged sibling relationships raise in her comprehensive article about them.

What at first might seem like consensual and lateral relationships actually display significant imbalances in power. The male in each case benefits from the prerogative of travel, and autonomy available to him in a patriarchal culture: he has more knowledge of the world than his "sister," and more sexual experience, and he is slightly older. The relationships also necessitate secrecy, something the "brother" either enforces or the "sister" instinctively grasps...While Smith's characters from the 1990's may not recognize fully the problematic nature of their "love" affairs, Smith clearly does, and she traces with increasing subtlety the consequences that these early relationships hold for the young girls involved and the adult women they become. (130).

While Grace and Lamar's is among the most damaging that Smith creates, it lasts only a short amount of time compared to the relationship between Rose Annie and her non-biological cousin, Johnny Rainette, in *The Devil's Dream*. Rose Annie calls Johnny, "Cousin, brother, heart of my heart, best friend," and is drawn to him from the time she learns to talk (*Dream* 136). The pair begins a sexual affair as teenagers, and though Rose Annie goes on to marry and have children with another man, she never stops thinking about Johnny. Still, despite her unending devotion to Johnny, Rose Annie

realizes the damage their relationship has caused her. As Billips writes, “Recounting a particularly risky sexual encounter the two have in close proximity to their gathered family and friends, Rose Annie acknowledges that ‘something broke in me that night, and it has not gone back right ever since’” (Billips 145). Rose Annie and Johnny eventually marry and become famous singers in Nashville, but the imbalance in their pairing catches up to them: Rose Annie shoots her cheating husband dead, and is confined to prison as a result.

It is easy to see the violence and danger in Grace and Rose Annie’s relationships, but Smith also includes more subtle depictions of the damage sexual sibling relationships can cause. In *The Last Girls*, for instance, quiet Harriet Holding pines for Jefferson Carr, the son of her mother’s lover. Described from Harriet’s perspective, “Jeff” is so wonderful that he is practically magical. When she sees him for the first time in years, for instance, “the clear air went iridescent” (*Last* 151). Jeff, though, is more interested in Harriet’s beautiful but troubled roommate, Baby, and Harriet becomes an uncomfortably accommodating third-wheel in their relationship. While Harriet claims, even in retrospect, to have enjoyed this arrangement, the danger it poses to her is underscored when Baby breaks things off with Jeff. Baby and Harriet fight, Jeff enlists in the military and is promptly killed, and Harriet is left with a grief that never leaves her. Before Jeff goes, though, Harriet finally tells him that she wants him, and the two have desperate, melancholy sex. Harriet “sat by the phone for the next two weeks, willing it to ring, willing it to be for her,” but Jeff never calls or answers her letters (*Last* 310).

Despite his emotional unavailability, Jeff Carr is not abusive in the mold of Lamar or Johnny Rainette. In fact, if not for the presence of “brothers” like Lamar and Johnny in

Smith's fiction, his position as Harriet's brother figure would not even be especially troubling. Jeff is not biologically related to Harriet, he does not often inhabit her house, and neither Harriet's mother nor Jeff's father takes on an especially paternal role with their lover's child. Significantly, Harriet also is the sexual aggressor in their relationship; Jeff sleeps with her only when she climbs into his bed and initiates their encounter. What Smith does, then, by casting Jeff as a brother figure to Harriet, is encourage readers to look beyond Harriet's admiring perspective and gain a more nuanced impression of Jeff. He is a type of which Smith has taught her readership to be skeptical, and Smith invites us to question the worth of all Harriet's nostalgia and longing by positioning him as brother. Sarah Towers alluded to this invitation in her *New York Times* review of *The Last Girls*. "One can't help wishing," she writes, "that Harriet would just pack up all her press clippings and memories...and get on with her life a little sooner" (Towers).

MENTAL ILLNESS

When Smith was a teenager, both of her parents were in psychiatric hospitals at the same time. "My father was overworked and had a nervous breakdown," she recalls, and "my mother was always anxious and...would get into a 'state'" (V. Smith 72). Smith's fiction is full of middle-class white parents whose struggles with depression or alcoholism are never stated in clinical terms, particularly to their children. For many of the youngest narrators in Smith's fiction – Karen, who is thirteen years old in "Tongues of Fire," for instance – the mental illness of a parent is liberating as well as

disconcerting. With her family distracted by her father's depression, Karen has greater autonomy to venture to her friend Tammy's rural home. Older characters, however, and those who are not of the upper-middle classes, tend to struggle more with the consequences of mental illness, and their illnesses often occur because of obvious catalysts. While the reason for Karen's father's breakdown remains a mystery for Smith's readers, the causes of Fay's psychological distress do not. Her deterioration after being raped by Jewell Rife, killing him, and giving up their daughter, Candy, reverberates through most of Fay's family. "Forty years after his death," Tebbetts notes, "Jewell Rife is still present in the lives of his major victim Fay and of the five adult but variously dysfunctional children of the family" (Tebbetts 100). Temporally and personally, mental illness is a far-reaching problem in *Family Linen*.

In their study of the nervous breakdown in 20th century American culture, the social historians Megan Barke, Rebecca Fribush and Peter N. Stearns note the appeal of the term "nervous breakdown" in discourse communities. "In an age of medicalization," they explain, "People liked the idea of a disease entity that described symptoms and anxieties they felt, rather than an entity clearly delimited by the burgeoning apparatus of the mental health professionals" (Barke 566). The term also came into popular usage because it remained essentially undefined: "Flexible vagueness made it a valid catchall" for any number of issues (Barke 576). The term's vagueness comes in handy for parents in Smith's novels. After Karen's mother says to her, "your father is having a nervous breakdown," she declines to elaborate. "This was the only time," Karen thinks, "she ever mentioned my father's nervous breakdown out loud, in her whole life" (*Eclipse* 72). By telling family and friends only that her husband had a nervous breakdown, Karen's

mother, Dee, can admit that he has a problem without implicitly acknowledging any potentially embarrassing details.

Without further clarification from her mother, Karen is left to puzzle out the meaning of her father's "nervous breakdown" on her own. Initially, her appraisal of his symptoms is limited. "This explained the way my father's eye twitched and watered now, behind his gold-rimmed glasses," she thinks; "[he] spent more time lying on the daybed upstairs in his study, holding books or magazines in his hands but not reading them" (*Eclipse* 73). What Karen does understand, instead of her father's experience, is her mother's unstated plan for dealing with it:

1. The husband *should not* have a nervous breakdown.
 2. Nobody can mention the nervous breakdown. It is shameful.
 3. The children must *behave* at all times during the nervous breakdown.
 4. The family must keep up appearances at all costs. Nobody should know.
- (*Eclipse* 72).

It is only when Karen's father collapses in tears on the golf course that she realizes mental illness is more than a supposed source of shame. "I had come realize somehow, during the course of that afternoon" she recalls, "that...we might never be all right again" (*Eclipse* 92).

Karen becomes interested in speaking in tongues just a few days after her father's collapse, looking, as Ostwalt argues, for a measure of control. "The first time Karen hears glossolalia, she knows she has discovered a source of power at her friend's Holiness church" (Ostwalt 112). Though she does not understand her mother's vague language at home, Karen immediately connects with the strange sounds she hears in church. It is, she thinks, "a language which I felt I knew intimately, somehow, better than I knew English. It was *my language*" (*Eclipse* 96). Though Karen claims familiarity

and ownership of the words she hears – and, later, speaks – she values the attention the words command, too. At summer camp, when Karen believes God appears to her alone in a cabin, she recalls how she immediately knew what to do. “I...washed my face and brushed my teeth...tucked in my shirt, and ran up the hill to the assembly hall,” Karen says. “I opened my mouth, closed my eyes, and started speaking in Tongues of Fire” (*Eclipse* 111). It is important for Karen to be in front of an audience when she speaks, and she takes the time to groom herself before she goes to it. Though there is an evangelical explanation for Karen’s choice to speak in the assembly hall, it is clear that she is eager to be heard, even when speaking words her peers do not understand.

Nervous breakdowns in Smith’s fiction sometimes are accompanied by or conflated with alcoholism. In “Live Bottomless,” for instance, Jennifer’s mother, Billie, enters treatment – “a nice little rest,” as adults describe it to Jennifer – after her healthy gin-and-tonic appetite gets out of hand (*News* 95). Intensified by the death of her younger brother and the discovery of her husband’s affair, Billie’s reliance on alcohol is a symptom of her larger psychological struggles. Alcoholism also is at the forefront of *The Devil’s Dream*, where it is addressed more explicitly. Katie Cocker knows from a young age that her grandfather, Durwood, and her father drink too much, despite her mother’s attempts to keep that information from her. “Tillie Dew said her mamma said that my granddaddy was an alcoholic,” Katie tells Alice after riding the school bus one day. Alice’s response is more violent than those of Karen’s mother or Jenny’s father. “She slapped me so far across the face that I fell against the wall,” Katie recalls, leaving marks that lasted a week (*Dream* 220). Even in the rural Grassy Branch community, addiction is stigmatized and supposed to remain a sort of open secret.

Though Katie eventually begins drinking too much, herself, her openness about alcoholism and her other struggles suggests that she mostly has healed. Katie accepts her failings instead of hiding them, and, as the name of her section of the novel suggests, “tells it like it is” (*Dream* 207).

No characters are secretive about the mental illness of Fay, whose rape worsens her vulnerable mental state in *Family Linen*. Even her sister Elizabeth, who refuses to acknowledge most any reality that she does not like, writes in her memoirs about early signs that Fay was disturbed. After their mother dies, Elizabeth finds five-year old Fay “in the bottom of Mam’s Wardrobe, all hunched into a ball, sucking her thumb. She alone did not cry, not then, nor Later, I believe” (*FL* 175). When Fay replicates that image of enclosure, hardly leaving the same small room for years at a time, other members of her family are more explicit about her condition. She “hadn’t said a whole sentence since about 1975,” Fay’s nephew, Arthur thinks. “It’s a damn loony in out there at the One Stop” (*FL* 89). Still, despite the family’s frank assessments of Fay’s condition, no one knows for sure the reason for her disturbance. Even Nettie, who saw Jewell Rife rape Fay and watched Fay give up her baby, Candy, to be raised by Elizabeth, does not know that Fay killed Jewell.

Alone with her secrets, Fay becomes a grotesque figure, enormous and incoherent in her claustrophobic den. She is “getting real heavy now,” her nephew Arthur observes, “like a big white slug that never sees the light of day” (*FL* 88). By describing Fay thusly, Smith invites comparisons of her to other figures in Southern fiction, especially Emily Grierson of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” Like Fay, Emily grows large and sequesters herself indoors for years at a time. Both women also kill

their lovers when they threaten to leave. While Emily literally stays in bed with Homer Barron's body, Fay remains nearly immobile, occupied with Jewell Rife in her mind. As Tebbetts observes, "It is as if Fay entered the well with Jewell's body and has never climbed out" (Tebbetts 105). In her description of the Southern grotesque, the critic Sarah Gleeson-White could practically be writing a description of Fay. The trope, she argues, generally includes "freakish outsiders placed in lovelorn, barren landscapes, penetrating heat, and closed spaces, with themes of miscegenation, sexual deviance, and bloody violence" (Gleeson-White 108). The applicability of Gleeson-White's description to Fay is sadly underscored when Fay dies: "Miss Fay has gone and shut herself up in Clinus's old Chevrolet out there," the man who finds her body says, "It was the heat that killed her, it looks like" (*FL* 254). Fay's rape by Jewell Rife leads her to increasingly claustrophobic spaces, the last of which is too much to survive.

Smith suggests the interconnectedness of family when she shows how Fay's mental state affects the rest of her family. Tebbetts has compared Fay's relatives to the Bundrens, who journey in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to bury their deceased wife and mother, Addie. He argues that Smith closely follows the plot of Faulkner's novel, save for one key diversion: rather than working to bury their mother, Elizabeth's children find it necessary to unbury their "father," Jewell. "Although Mother lies near death, then dies, and even 'speaks' after death when her daughter Lacy discovers her old journal, getting Mother buried is not an issue," he writes. "Instead [the novel] drives toward and derives restored order from the disinterment of the Father" (Tebbetts 99). Only when Jewell's physical body has been removed from their lives – they install a swimming pool at his former burial site – can Arthur begin to grow up, Sybill live without the pain of

her headaches, and Myrtle begin a career in real estate. Tebbetts persuasively argues that until Jewell is removed, each of Elizabeth's children are immobilized, in less literal but still significant ways, along with Fay: "*Family Linen* suggests, then, that the 'father's power' is a kind of motion characteristic of some men, a motion which can inspire motion in the lives of others. It further suggests that men are responsible for nurturing that motion in their sons and daughters" (Tebbetts 103). That Fay's body is removed at nearly the same time as Jewell's also is crucial for her family's recovery, but also sad. Though both Nettie and Elizabeth describe Fay as a kind, smiling presence before Jewell Rife rapes her, she is too damaged to become that way, again.

COMMUNITY AND APPEARANCES

The upper-middle class white communities in which Smith often situates her fiction are by turns restrictive and supportive for characters throughout her novels and stories. In the works from *Family Linen* to *The Last Girls*, social class affects the choices Smith's characters make about religion, friendship, and sexuality. For young narrators, such as Karen, of "Tongues of Fire," parents simply disallow socialization with members of certain socioeconomic groups. In Smith's work, the desire to cross social boundaries exists in both directions: the daughters of ladylike mothers long to eat canned stew at their friend's modest houses, and the daughters of poor parents want to visit the country club. Women who live away from their parents are in many ways freer to make their own unconventional choices, but they do not always do so. Elizabeth Hess of *Family Linen*, for instance, refuses to admit any of her troubles to her sister, Nettie, even

when they threaten to overwhelm her. “Keeping up appearances” emerges as the most important guideline for middle class women in Lee Smith’s fiction.

Like the mothers in “Tongues of Fire” and “Live Bottomless,” Courtney Gray of *The Last Girls* makes major choices in her life based on her sense of obligation, and on how they will appear to her community. In a conversation with MacKethan, Smith confessed that Courtney is drawn from her own life: “Courtney is more like my mother’s voice still whispering in my head, ‘Now Lee, you know you really OUGHT to...’” (MacKethan, “Multiple”). Though order comes naturally to Courtney, who “is on the vestry of Saint Matthews Church...the Dogwood Historic Preservation Society and [the] Friends of the Library, she clings to it even when it prevents her from following her heart. This self-sabotaging tendency is most apparent when Courtney breaks off her affair with Gene Minor, an overweight florist who does not fit into her elegant life. Tellingly, Gene is absent from Courtney’s perfectly arranged scrapbooks, which she calls “the pride of her life” (LG 38). “Gene Minor is just for *her*,” she thinks, “He has no business here among [her family photos]” (LG 47). The contrast between the life Courtney presents in her albums and the life she lives with Gene is striking, but she still tries to manipulate him with tactics learned in her life as a “lady.” During their last phone call, in which she tries to convince Gene to continue seeing her despite her refusal to leave Hawk, her husband, Courtney thinks: “*Never apologize, never explain. Just talk real sweet and you can have whatever you want*” (LG 340).

Karen memorably defines how class and religion are associated when she lays out her mother’s guidelines for church attendance. She says:

My mother had already explained to me the social ranking of the churches: Methodist at the top, attended by doctors and lawyers and other “nice” families; Presbyterian slightly down the scale, attended by store owners; then the vigorous Baptists; then the Church of Christ, who thought they were the only real church in town and said so...And then, of course, at the *very bottom* of the church scale were those little churches out in the surrounding county, some of them recognizable denominations (Primitive Baptist) and some of them not (Church of the Nazarene, Tar River Holiness) where people were reputed to yell out, fall down in fits, and throw their babies. (64)

In her explanation, Karen’s mother echoes Brooke Kincaid’s mother, Carolyn, who marvels that her friend is a Baptist. “Nobody in the world is a Baptist except the lower elements and the Hugheses” (*Something* 14). Unlike Brooke, however, Karen quickly and purposefully inserts herself into the “very bottom” of her mother’s denominational ranking system. When she finds out that her friend Tammy’s mother attends a rural church where she speaks in tongues, Karen draws on class distinctions to gain admission to that church. “I would get to go to church with Tammy and her mother,” she relates, “in return, I would take Tammy to the country club” (*Eclipse* 88). Karen’s attendance at Tammy’s church is so transgressive to her mother that she sends her to an extended summer camp with class-appropriate Episcopal services. Though she once speaks in tongues at camp, Karen’s mother’s actions have their desired effects. She never goes back to Tammy’s house after her return, and she goes on to “make cheerleader,” “go to college,” “get breasts,” and “have babies” (*Eclipse* 116). When Karen stops crossing religious boundaries, she adopts behaviors more conventional of her social class, too.

Grace, like Karen’s friend Tammy, longs to cross socioeconomic boundaries in the opposite direction: she frequently is resentful of the monetary and cultural hardships that her father’s faith imposes on her family. At school, Grace recalls being

“embarrassed about my own lunch, which was nothing but a piece of cornbread usually, and sometimes a mason jar of buttermilk to break the cornbread up in...Some days I didn’t have a lunch at all, and then I always said I was on a diet” (*SG* 44). Grace tries to hide the poverty that makes her feel ashamed; it is poverty directly traceable to her family’s religious beliefs. As an adult, Grace sometimes chafes against Travis Word’s monetary philosophy. On the day of their wedding, for instance, she is disappointed to find that Travis plans to take her back to his house for the night. ““When I got to thinking about it,”” he tells Grace, ““it just seemed to me like a sinful waste of money to spend twenty dollars on a motel room when we have got our own bed at home”” (*SG* 183). Travis’s guilt about spending money is connected with his guilt about having sex with Grace, a link that the motel room conversation pointedly illustrates. For much of Grace’s life, Christianity means deprivation, and sometimes humiliation.

Grace’s family’s religious identification also isolates them within their community. Despite the rotating masses of religious followers Virgil amasses, Grace rightly feels that many parts of mainstream society are inaccessible to her. After visiting her friend, Marie Royal, when Marie’s grandparents call, Grace thinks, “I didn’t know my own grandparents – I didn’t even know if I had any. We didn’t have a telephone at our house either” (*SG* 53). Ultimately, Grace’s family also cuts off her connection with Marie: when her friend unexpectedly drops by the house on Scrabble Creek, she sees Virgil and Grace’s brother, Joe, covered in blood after a violent fight. “Marie started crying...Her mother got out of the car and started screaming for her to come. Without a word to [Grace], Marie turned and ran down the hill and got in the car, and then they were gone” (*SG* 64). Though Marie’s family has been kind to and supportive of Grace despite what

they know of her parents, they stop associating with her once Marie is put into a potentially dangerous situation. Unlike the middle class families in many of Smith's novels, the Shepherds have little interest in keeping up appearances or upholding community standards, unless they are those of God.

In *The Christmas Letters*, Smith creates a character who, over the course of her lifetime, crosses the class boundaries that Grace Shepherd does not. Mary Copeland, the second narrator of the novella, goes from living on a modest farm to living in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. Mary initially upholds the conventions of her middle-class community in her Christmas letters. "I want everybody out there to know that I am *fine*, happy as can be in this little aqua shoebox of a home with my baby Andrew" (CL 46). Mary is comfortable using her community's discourse, and knows what she ought to reveal in polite letters. It is only later in the novella, once Mary and her husband, Sandy, have divorced, that Mary writes an honest Christmas letter. Addressed only to her "Very Special Friends," Mary writes "A *REAL* CHRISTMAS LETTER, THE FIRST EVER," acknowledging that her other's have been relatively shallow. While she lived in the "aqua shoebox," for instance, Mary actually was having an emotional affair with her neighbor, the alcoholic Gerald Ruffin. "We used to sit out on those crummy lawn chairs talking and talking all night long," she writes, "...while the bugs flew around and the BIG AL'S TIRE sign shone all night long just beyond the blooming honeysuckle that covered the stockade fence enclosing us from the 'bad neighborhood,' which surrounded us on every side. Oh, how sweet that honeysuckle smelled – I will never forget it" (CL 91). The contrast between Mary's original letter and her honest letter suggests the extent to

which “keeping up appearances” disguises beautiful experiences along with unfortunate ones.

When Mary stops abiding by her sense of obligation, she is amazed at the life she creates. Just as her letters become more honest, so, too, do her actions: Mary attends college, accepts her gay son’s boyfriend as more than just “a friend from California,” (*CL* 82), and even joins the Peace Corps. The food references that close the last two Christmas letters of the novella nicely illustrate Mary’s new freedom. In the former of these letters, Mary writes that her son and his boyfriend are carrying on the family’s tradition of making “Sticks and Stones” for Christmas (*CL* 118). The recipe, which is hand-me-down from Mary’s mother, Birdie, has always been Mary’s responsibility to prepare. In her post-divorce life, however, Mary is willing to delegate responsibility, and to be cared for in addition to caring for others. The latter recipe, which is the last in the novella, is one that Mary sends from her Peace Corps post in Africa. “NDIWOZ AZ MPIRU WOTENDERA” contains greens and peanut butter, and is shared by Mary’s daughter Melanie in her first Christmas letter. “I almost forgot this recipe from Mom,” Melanie writes, “(who said not to mention the anthropologist)” (*CL* 126). The recipes, together, trace a lineage of female support from Birdie to Mary to Melanie that each woman values. By the end of her story, Mary has learned to balance family with her own inclinations, and tradition with new experiences.

“I Am the One Who Tells the Stories”: *On Agate Hill*

Lee Smith published her 12th novel, *On Agate Hill*, in the fall of 2006. Though it closely follows 1996's *The Christmas Letters* and 2003's *The Last Girls* in the chronology of Smith's novels, its form and content are more reminiscent of *Oral History* (1983) and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) than they are of those works. Like *Oral History*, *On Agate Hill* is framed as a historical research project undertaken by a young, female student. It does not contain the large number of narrators that *Oral History* does, but its own kind of polyvocality comes from the various types of fictionalized historical sources that compose it. Diary entries, letters, court documents, and descriptions of found relics are all offered up for examination in the novel. Still, despite this diversity of material, *On Agate Hill* has a focus like that of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, centered as it is on decades in the life of one particular girl, Molly Petree, an orphan whose family breaks apart during and immediately following the U.S. Civil War. It follows Molly as she matures into a young woman, becomes a still-young widow, and reaches old age.

Though elements of *On Agate Hill* are familiar from Smith's earlier novels, its initial Civil War setting is unique in Smith's fiction. Smith had written about undeniably Southern locations before, such as when she satirized small town Alabama in *Fancy Strut*. She had also set plenty of fiction in the past, as she did with the turn-of-the-century mountain setting of *The Devil's Dream*. Until 2006, though,

she had not written about the Southern past of plantations, war, and slavery. In an interview with Locklear, Smith explains her decision to write a more explicitly Southern novel. "I never wrote about or was interested in the Civil War at all, ever before," she reveals. "It's just because I had just moved into this house...right next door to the Civil War cemetery, and it has this legend associated with it...I just got interested" (Locklear 227-8). Inspired by her house's past, Smith began the historical research that would become *On Agate Hill*, working at both the nearby Orange County Historical Museum and the Burwell School Historic Site (OAH 365). In her acknowledgments, she also writes of visiting Stagville Plantation and Bennett Place, and of reading diaries, oral histories, and memoirs to inform her novel. Growing as it did from Smith's Hillsborough home, *On Agate Hill* is, as Smith told the *Milwaukee Journal*, "such a private book and such a very local book" (Waggoner).

Smith calls the book "private" because, although the novel's beginning arose from her move to Hillsborough, she continued to write it largely because of her son, Joshua Seay, who died suddenly in 2003 at the age of 32. She initially abandoned the novel after his death. But, when a therapist suggested she "'get out of [her] own head for awhile everyday,'" Smith resumed working. "It's Josh's book," she has said, and "it's a piece of my heart" (Waggoner). In addition to dedicating the book to her son, Smith inscribed him into the narrative, too; the character Juney, whom MacKethan calls "a wise and winsome listener," is based on Josh (MacKethan "Multiple"). As Smith tells it: "Through the mysterious alchemy of fiction, my sweet Josh had managed to find his own way into the final pages of the novel after all, as a mystical bluesman and healer living wild and free at last in the deep piney woods he used

to play in as a child” (Smith “Showing”). Though *On Agate Hill* is less obviously autobiographical than some of Smith’s work, it is infused with her experience of loss.

Although *On Agate Hill* is most distinguished in Smith’s fiction by its unique setting, it also is structurally innovative. Smith’s use of a variety of fictionalized sources, for instance, underscores her continued emphasis on telling alternate versions of history by calling attention to the oral or otherwise unconventional narratives of persons not often represented in history textbooks.¹⁹ That these intratextual artifacts – diaries, court testimony, and letters, particularly – are either meant to be private or to represent an individual’s subjective view also suggests Smith’s belief that the past is open to subjective interpretation, even by those who lived it. The most striking of these stories is that of Simon Black, a former Confederate soldier who makes his postwar fortune in Brazil. Smith upends stereotypes of the Southern gentleman through Black’s story, and undermines romantic notions of plantation life through Molly’s. On Agate Hill, former slaves are kind but not blindly loyal, and they are in relatively intimate contact with their former masters.

Molly’s story, particularly, is suggestive of ideas about family, memory, and loss. With most of her biological family dead before she reaches age thirteen, Molly tries to balance her perceived responsibility to remember these people and their stories with her desire to form new connections. By positioning herself as a “ghost girl,” Molly anchors herself in her family’s past – some of which she was not alive for

¹⁹ Because Smith undertook so much historical research to create *On Agate Hill*, too, the novel in some ways offers insight into her own writing process. She offers readers a multimedia-style assemblage of fictionalized historical evidence to evaluate, much as she evaluated actual historical sources to inform her writing.

– even as she exists in its present. Gwin has written about situations such as Molly’s in the history of the South: “Cultural memory and mourning kept alive through writing and stories are as much spatial as temporal,” she observes. They “exist in both the past and the present, yet they move us toward a future that will inevitably become the past” (Gwin 1). Molly’s memories are both derived from Agate Hill and of greater importance to her when she lives there. Though her memories burden Molly sometimes, they sustain her in others. She derives particular sustenance from them in the last section of the novel, when she returns to the old plantation. Molly modifies her idea about what constitutes a family when she returns.

Like Ivy Rowe before her, Molly Petree gains a sense of herself by writing, a pursuit in which she engages for decades of her life. She also shares Ivy’s tendency to create “doubles” for herself, and mirrors Ivy’s desire for a community of women from whom she can draw strength. Unlike Ivy’s voice, however, Molly’s is informed by her formal education. As a student and, eventually, a teacher, Molly uses her diary and her lessons to establish her identity and sort through the events of her life. The most significant impact of Molly’s education may be that she leaves her diary intact to be unearthed by Tuscan Miller. While Ivy burns her letters, citing the importance of process over product, Molly preserves a record of her life, an action which is consistent with her desire to keep her family’s stories and memories alive. Though Molly feels like the same person when she comes full circle and returns to Agate Hill, her experiences have made her simultaneously more literal and more full of love.

Smith's belief that the book was personal made its largely favorable critical reviews surprising to her. One particularly positive review came from Donna Rifkind of *The Washington Post*, who wrote that despite *On Agate Hill*'s tricky subject matter, Smith "never allows her narrative to slip into kitsch, stereotype, or melodrama" (Rifkind). The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* was equally impressed by Smith's "command of her talent for strong stories and evocative characters," calling the novel her "best yet" (Roberts). Still, not all critics were as enthusiastic. *The New York Times*'s Roy Hoffman, for instance, was measured in his acclaim for the novel, praising Smith's ability to "[bring] to life children who see much and tell all," but alleging that Molly's childhood writing was "too good to be true...too conspicuously guided by the hand of the author" (Hoffman).

Roberts and other reviewers, effusive or reserved, often compared *On Agate Hill* both to Smith's earlier novels and to the works of other writers. Hoffman, for example, compares Molly Petree to the heroines of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novels *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess*, characterizing them as "smart, dreamy girls, wrenched from happy childhoods by the loss of their parents" (Hoffman). Donald Harington of the *Raleigh News and Observer* used chronology as a basis to draw comparisons with other novels published in the fall of 2006, asserting that "*On Agate Hill* will not merely hold its own with the best of them, but also will serve as a model for future writers of historical fiction" (Harington). That Smith's novel was published alongside works by Thomas Pynchon and Charles Frazier, who also set their 2006 novels *Against the Day* and *Thirteen Moons*, respectively, in the 19th century, makes this praise even more striking.

Smith's historical novel also naturally invites comparisons to fiction about the Civil War period in U.S. history. The most obvious of these is to Margaret Mitchell's hugely popular *Gone With the Wind* (1936), which also features a plantation setting and includes scenes that occur after the War's end. While Mitchell's novel examines "genteel poverty" and emphasizes its heroine's pursuit of material wealth, however, *Agate Hill* approaches postbellum plantation life from a more somber perspective. One example of this difference is that the slaves of Tara supposedly are glad to stay and serve Scarlett after the War, but Molly's family's former slaves depart in the night, unwilling to stay as Agate Hill deteriorates; another is that Molly never materially rebuilds Agate Hill, but instead reconstructs something resembling a family life within its crumbling walls. The novel also resonates with another work from Mitchell's era, William Faulkner's 1940 novel, *The Unvanquished*. Like *On Agate Hill*, Faulkner's novel employs a then-young narrator to describe the War's domestic aftermath. The teenager Bayard Sartoris is good friends with Ringo, a young former slave living on his family's plantation, much as Molly is with Washington. In both novels, these friendships lead to the blurring of racial boundaries that unsettles older relatives of the white characters. In *On Agate Hill*, Molly's familiarity with Washington upsets her prim Aunt Cecilia, while in *The Unvanquished*, Bayard and his grandmother move into one of the slave cabins after Union soldiers torch their house.²⁰

²⁰ Smith also evokes Faulkner later in the novel, when Molly attempts to bury Simon Black at a farm relatively near Agate Hill. "No one had told me that it had become a golf club," Molly writes, "dotted with golfers and caddies" (*OAH* 349). The transformation from family home to golf course recalls the evolution of the Compson land in Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). The image of

As she did with *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Barbara Bates Smith adapted *On Agate Hill* for the stage, playing each of the novel's primary characters in her one-woman show. Jim Cavener of the *Asheville Citizen-Times* reviewed a performance of the play at the North Carolina Stage Company, calling Bates Smith "a marvel as she slipped from character to character" (Cavener). Bates Smith signaled her move from one character to the next by placing a "signature item" representative of each character on a table, and by modifying her voice to channel each. Cavener also praised the "talented vocal, banjo, and hammer dulcimer score by Jeff Sebens," who used songs "both familiar and new" to accompany Bates Smith's performance. The play's musical component reflects the importance of music in the novel itself; Molly's wild husband, Jacky Jarvis, comes from a family of talented musicians, and the "evidence" in Tuscany's box includes a ballad, "Molly and the Traveling Man" (OAH 308). As in *The Devil's Dream*, music is a family affair in *On Agate Hill*.

In 2012, Bates Smith used pieces of her "Agate Hill" show for a new production, "Agate Hill to Appomattox: Southern Women's Voices." The play, which draws from *On Agate Hill*, Allan Gurganous's *Oldest Living Confederate Widow*, and Ron Rash's 2010 story collection, *Burning Bright*, premiered in Chapel Hill, NC on June 8, 2012. Offering "home-front glimpses," the *Agate Hill* portion of the production focuses on Molly's return to Agate Hill, where she "recall[s] the making up of love stories with dolls named Margaret and Robert E. Lee," among other girlhood activities" ("Bates Smith"). By juxtaposing Smith's novel with other recent

Molly and Henry driving Black's coffin in a wagon, only to turn around without actually burying him also brings to mind Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

Civil War fictions, Bates Smith showcases the prominent role that female characters have played in these publications.

ALTERNATE HISTORIES

In *On Agate Hill*, Smith continues to invite her readership to consider histories that fall outside dominant historical narratives. By setting a Civil War novel after the conflict's end, Smith is able to fictionalize material and psychological effects of the war that would not be fully apparent when battles still were waged. She writes, for instance, of how racial dynamics between former slaves, still living on plantations, and their onetime owners change after the conflict, and of whether traumatized soldiers are reintegrated, or not, into postbellum society. Smith's focus on the home front does not mean, however, that the novel is concerned only with the war's legacy for women and children, or other domestic figures. While Smith does focus a great deal of attention on characters who never see battle – Molly Petree, Selena Vogell, and Junius Hall, especially – one of the most striking stories she includes is that of Simon Black, a Confederate soldier who fled the United States after watching his army's surrender at Bennett farmhouse. Through Black's narrative, which is revealed in a letter he writes to Molly Petree, Smith plumbs the relatively obscure history of *Confederados*, mostly male white Southerners who emigrated to South America after the Civil War. She also continues her practices of showcasing nontraditional sources of historical information, and of subverting stereotypes about historical figures. Though Simon Black is a wealthy former soldier

born on a plantation, his wealth is self-made, he fled war, and his plantation residence was in an outbuilding with his blacksmith father. Including this historical perspective is one way that Smith, intentionally or not, participates in what Susan V. Donaldson has called “the necessity of responding to and writing against the long shadow cast by *Gone with the Wind* on popular memories of slavery, the antebellum South, and the Civil War era” (Donaldson 268).²¹

In *On Agate Hill*, Smith has created what critic David W. Price calls a “poietic history,” one that “present[s] us with the emotional, psychological, and intellectual dimensions [of history] that we experience from the inside of a fictional character or imagined situation” (Price 2). The novel’s historical story is framed by the twenty-first century narration of Tuscany Miller, a young woman seeking readmission to a “documentary studies program” (*OAH* 1). After Tuscany’s father and his partner move into a “completely run down plantation,” they give Tuscany a box filled with historical relics; she forwards it to a former professor in hopes of reentering his program. Though Tuscany has a gratingly modern voice – her commentary on the teacher Mariah Snow’s diary, for instance, is, “She was so weird” – her inclusion in the novel serves two significant functions (*OAH* 127).²² First, Tuscany is a plausible

²¹ Donaldson cites works by Toni Morrison, Edward P. Jones, and Valerie Martin as especially concerned with altering popular perceptions of the era with respect to slavery.

²² Though Tuscany’s voice can be jarring when it interrupts Molly’s poetic writing or Agnes Rutherford’s thoughtful letters, she is a more thoughtful and aware narrator than Jennifer of *Oral History*, her closest counterpart in Smith’s fiction. Tuscany recognizes the significance of the historical voices and relics she encounters, rather than dismissing those voices as primitive or unworthy of attention. That the history is not her family’s and is delivered by long-dead sources instead of prickly live ones may influence her comparative openness to grappling with it.

source for the historical items that she sends her professor. Because the items are so varied in their origins and authorship, it makes good narrative sense to explain how, through Tuscany, they came to be grouped together. More importantly, though, Tuscany acts as a humorous surrogate for Smith, herself. The process by which Tuscany gathers historical documents and pieces them together to shape the history of Molly Petree is not unlike the process by which Smith researched *On Agate Hill*. Both Smith and her narrator were introduced to their material by a move to a historic house, and, though she likely gives herself too little credit, Smith claims to have felt she, like Tuscany, did little more than editorial work in writing the novel. In her words, “It just took off and wrote itself” (Smith “Showing”). That an investigator as seemingly hapless as Tuscany can unearth and become immersed in such a rich history suggests the power of the relics, themselves – diaries and letters and court documents offer a more intimate look at the past than would the average history textbook.

The novel’s first historical document, Molly Petree’s diary, tells of life at Agate Hill plantation in 1872-3, approximately seven years after the Confederate army’s surrender. Most of Molly’s immediate family has died, and the thirteen-year old diarist lives with her despondent Uncle Junius, his servant and eventual wife, Selena Vogell and her children, and a few of the family’s former slaves. Through Molly’s precocious voice, Smith fictionalizes the War’s psychological aftermath for a damaged soldier and the way it initially altered social and racial relations on a former plantation. The soldier in question is Spencer Hall, Molly’s cousin. Spence, as he’s called, “walked home from the war Insane,” and lives in nearby house with

Romulus, “a skinny mean looking negro man with scars on his cheeks [who] used to be the slave driver” (*OAH* 104).

Romulus’s name carries associations with memory that, while non-existent in 1872, suggest his role as a sort of sacrificial reservoir for Spence. He is nicknamed “Rom,” which is homographic with ROM, the commonly used acronym for a specific type of computer memory. ROM is where information that starts the computer is stored, and its makeup cannot be changed without a great deal of effort. Thus, Rom potentially is associated, for 21st century readers, with ingrained memories, which he carries along with his physical scars. Like Ivy and Silvaney of *Fair and Tender Ladies* – one wild but insane, the other able to cope – Rom and Spence are two halves of an unusual whole: while Spence seems to remember nothing of the war, Rom bears the burden of memory.

The physical proximity in which these men, one white, one black, live together is accepted as a matter of course at Agate Hill. But, when Molly’s stern Aunt Cecilia visits, the socially transgressive nature of this arrangement is highlighted. After a group of “ruffians” from town comes looking for Romulus, Cecilia scolds Junius for encouraging Romulus’s “manner,” and says, “it is just not right for Spencer to live out there” (*OAH* 61).²³ Cecilia’s words are not enough to bring about a change in Spence and Rom’s relationship, but the two are eventually violently separated by their community. After a group of men attack Rom for speaking to a white woman behind the counter of a store, Spence enters the fight and is shot in the head. Spence’s death reiterates the precarious nature of his arrangement with Rom.

By bringing an outsider, Cecilia, into the isolated world of Agate Hill, Smith catalyzes Molly's recognition of the many ways in which Uncle Junius rejects societal norms pertaining to race and class. Cecilia is aghast, for instance, that Molly spends much of her time playing with Washington, the son of a slave and Molly's "best friend on this place" (*OAH* 9). Her outrage intensifies when she realizes that Washington has been taught to read, an action she considers "'the very height of irresponsibility'" (*OAH* 63). Still, Cecilia stays on at Junius's plantation despite her objections to the racial dynamic there because she believes she can change it; she busies Washington with chores that keep him from Molly's company. What Cecilia cannot abide, though, are the lapses in class distinction that Junius allows after the passing of his wife, Fannie. Specifically, Cecilia vehemently protests Junius's sexual relationship with Selena, the wife of his former tenant farmer, whom Cecilia calls his "gypsy whore" in front of Molly (*OAH* 62). When she realizes that Junius intends to marry Selena – thus making her heiress to what remains of Agate Hill – Cecilia leaves the plantation rather than remain to see it happen. By highlighting Cecilia's opposition to the union of Junius and Cecilia, Smith draws a provocative parallel between Southern societal norms regarding race and class. Cecilia's words and actions recall the tradition of the white Southern male bound to protect white Southern womanhood from the threat of miscegenation. As with other tropes in the novel, though, Smith turns this one around; in *On Agate Hill*, it is the defiantly aristocratic Southern woman determined to prevent her low-class counterpart from accessing the bed – and, not insignificantly, the inheritance – of the poor, helpless, Southern male.

If Smith begins to subvert the type of the Southern gentleman in the tale of Uncle Junius, Selena, and Cecilia, she continues to do so even more provocatively with the story of Simon Black, a tale which is revealed late in the novel. Black is a representative of confederate Civil War veterans in the novel. This figure, as Caroline Gebhard has written, “was ubiquitous in American fiction after the Civil War; in his ramrod posture, his integrity verging on absurdity, and above all in his unfailing sense of his own dignity, he embodied (white) southern male honor and pride” (Gebhard 133). Representations of this type, Gebhard argues, often are invested with “glamour and pathos, especially dramatized through their sentimental relations with their manservants.”²⁴ Smith’s version of this character, Simon Black, is Molly Petree’s mysterious benefactor and admirer of her mother, Alice. Before he confides in Molly Petree via a postmortem letter, Simon Black seems much like one of Gebhard’s “Colonels.” A wealthy former Confederate soldier, Black is endlessly dedicated to Molly because of a promise he made to her mother, the object of his unrequited love. The personal and financial interest he takes in her do, unexplained, seem absurd, and he travels with a mysterious manservant, Henry, at his beck and call. As a young woman, Molly resents his presence in her life, annoyed at intercessions and advice that she has not requested and does not understand.

²⁴ Gebhard’s article goes on to discuss how these “overblown” representations lend themselves to camp and “call into question any reductive reading of their appeal to the white mainstream, both North and South.” The “paradoxically homoerotic as well as homophobic vindication of southern white male values” and white supremacy that the figures’ usage suggests also functions to put southern white women “firmly back on the pedestal of an impossible purity.” Because Simon Black defies Gebhard’s historical type, Molly Petree happily avoids this fate.

By imbuing Black with many of these qualities, Smith creates a parallel between her postbellum man of mystery and these popular types. However, once she suggests their resemblance, Smith subverts the type by adding unexpected depth and vision to the character of Simon Black. In his letter to Molly, which she reads after his death, Black reveals a personal history that is both surprising and educational. For instance, while Black has the great financial resources of a stereotypical Southern gentleman, he is revealed to have amassed them in South America, where he fled, devastated, after deserting the Confederate army. As his letter continues, his position as a familiar figure further erodes: his plantation upbringing was as a lowly blacksmith's son, and Henry, never his slave, instead traveled with him from Brazil. The myth of the postbellum Southern gentleman, campy or not, does not always hold up under closer examination. Simon Black initially fits the fictional type, but once his character is known, he turns the trope on its head. Simon Black's narrative gives Smith an opportunity to present the history of *Confederados*, Southerners who immigrated to South America during and after the conflict.

Smith also highlights postbellum rural education in *On Agate Hill*. Although the novel's plantation setting is the most resonant setting in the novel – Molly's return to it, as an aged woman, brings her story full circle and to its close – Smith also unearths a relatively unexplored history in the mountains of North Carolina, where Molly and her teacher and friend Agnes Rutherford begin their own school and Molly marries Jacky Jarvis. The mountain setting provides an opportunity for Smith to explore 19th century rural education and the so-called "Moonlight Schools,"

where adults could attend evening classes. “It was surprising how many [students] there were,” Agnes writes, “and how badly they wanted to learn, walking the long roads home at all hours, often sleeping on the schoolhouse floor” (*OAH* 240). As Smith highlights this unconventional education, she also gives her reading audience an informal introduction to the history of these schools. Likewise, Smith’s readers share in the rudimentary history lessons that Molly and Agnes receive upon their arrival in the mountains. “We were once part of the State of Franklin,” fellow teacher Felix Boykin tells them, “an area formed from western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee which seceded from the Union right after the Revolutionary War” (*OAH* 226). Smith reveals here that, like the Southern states, Appalachia historically has been separated at times from the northern United States, and underscores the separation that exists between Appalachia and the rest of the South of which it geographically is a part. By moving the plot of her most Southern – with a capital “S” – novel to a rural mountain community not unlike those in some of her earlier novels, Smith gestures toward a connection between Appalachian and Southern histories.

MEMORY AND FAMILY

Molly Petree’s early diary entries feature a sad refrain. “I am an orphan girl,” she writes on its very first page, “I live in a house of ghosts” (*OAH* 7). Molly is physically without most of her family, but her frequent references to ghosts suggest the powerful degree to which they remain with her through stories, memories, and

the artifacts of Agate Hill. Molly echoes and expands upon her relationship with these ghosts as she writes, saying, for instance, "I can not go. For I am the only one left in the world who remembers these ghosts, who thinks of them now, and if I go then they will be gone too" (*OAH* 20). Molly feels a responsibility to record and steward her family's past, an obligation that stems both from her loneliness without them and from her desire to memorialize them. Molly's desire, according to David Lowenthal, is a fictional element that is common in the real world. "In recoiling from grievous loss or fending off a fearsome future," he has written in one study of how people grapple with the past, "people the world over revert to ancestral legacies" (Lowenthal xiii). That Molly's ghosts continue to resurface when she is no longer an imaginative child and when she does not reside at Agate Hill suggests their enduring influence on her life. As Minrose Gwin has written, "The 'ghosts' in the stories of southern history uncannily appear time and time again...[in] the mourning for family and community" (Gwin 6). Molly's ghosts literally appear within the space of the novel, but haunting also occurs outside the novel as a result of *On Agate Hill*. By offering Molly's fictional story to her reading audience, Lee Smith raises old southern ghosts in the contemporary world.

Molly has appropriated stories about her family from before she was alive and from when she was very young as her own memories, retelling them in her diary as though she lived them herself. "It was a summer evening and the house at Agate Hill was jam packed full of visitors as always," Molly begins one tale. "Little children [were] already asleep on a pallet upstairs while the others were finishing supper such as it was, Mamma always said when she told this story" (*OAH* 23). By

incorporating her mother's phrases into her own writing, Molly both reveals the frequency with which her mother told her the story, and attempts to preserve something of Alice; remembering the story itself is important, but so is remembering the language in which it is told. Molly also participates in the creation of a small-scale collective memory by dwelling in (hi)stories that are not her own. It is apparent that Molly's family's past is, at least initially, the primary way that Molly forms her identity because of the notable frequency with which she calls herself a "ghost" girl. Although Molly's tendency to conflate her remembered experiences with stories told by her mother and other family members seems exceptional, Jacques Le Goff notes that it is relatively common for children to assume the memories of others. "The history of our childhood," he writes, "is composed not only of our own first memories, but also of our parents' memories, and this part of our temporal perspective develops on the basis of both these components" (Le Goff 3). Thus, though Molly is a small child during the Civil War, her "temporal perspective" allows her to memorialize the conflict in her writing and her mind.

Though she writes pages about her own family's past, Molly also is a sometimes-reluctant repository for impressions of the past not directly gleaned from her family. She provides accounts that balance or contradict the Petree-Hall historical perspective even as she faithfully records that perspective. When, for instance, she and Mary White see "a negro hanging by the neck from a rope attached to a big old oak tree," Molly feels compelled to spread the word about the body and to record the incident in her diary. She also tells Mary White the other stories she has heard about violence against black persons, despite Mary White's reluctance to

hear. "I don't know why I always have to know things like that," she writes, "why I have to go on like that, but I do. It is the way I am. I always have to know everything" (*OAH* 80). Although Molly's familial experience of slavery has been with the institution in a comparatively gentle guise, she does not turn away from harsher histories that coexist with her family's stories and experience; instead, she actively seeks information about the larger world.

By providing context for her family's perspective, Molly both grounds their stories and underscores their exceptionalism. Her actions evoke another argument by Lowenthal, who writes that "No physical object...is an autonomous guide to bygone times; they light up the past only when we already know they belong to it" (Lowenthal, *The Past* 238). Molly's writing "lights up the past" of the objects that she and Mary White collect and examine. When, for instance, she and Mary White find a hand bone, which they call the "Yankee Hand," they save the item and write about it, too. "We wrapped the bones in honeysuckle..." Molly writes, "now [they] are here in a fancy little box I have had forever, just waiting" (*OAH* 53). Molly and Mary White eventually have an entire collection of "phenomena," but, unlike most of Molly's stories, the histories the girls create about the objects in their collection are not especially true. There is no evidence that the "Yankee Hand" is actually from a deceased Union soldier; rather, Molly and Mary White invent the hand's origin story based upon the spot where they find it. Molly's imagination and awareness of historical events outside of her family's past make her an ideal historical narrator for Smith: she assembles concrete artifacts, imaginative memories, newspaper accounts, and oracular stories to shape her own historical perception.

The urgency of Molly's need to remember is underscored by her juxtaposition with Spence, Junius's son who seems to remember nothing about his life after he returns from the Civil War. When she sees Spence, Molly writes, "I think, which is worse? To remember nothing or to remember too much, like me?" (*OAH* 104). Although Molly does not put her affliction in any sort of clinical terms, her complaint resembles hypermnesia, which Michael Roth calls "the disease of too much memory" (Roth 5). Though Molly is generally able to function under the weight of the past, her determination to remember aligns with some of Roth's criteria for sufferers of hypernesia; Molly's memory can be "an agent of disorder, overwhelming the present," and "throwing [other features of her life] out of balance" (Roth 16). When, for instance, Molly is unable to accompany Nora Gwyn, the wife of a local preacher, to attend school in Tennessee, Molly hides from Nora and cries alone. "I am a big girl and too old to cry," she explains, "but I know I will never see her again. Every time somebody leaves here, we never see them again" (*OAH* 23). Molly's past losses have left her fearful of the present, and they also lead to conflicts with the people with whom she must live instead of her family.

Though Molly often writes of her need to remember as though it is a burden or even a disease, like Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, she also emotionally depends upon her family's memories and stories. While she cries about Nora Gwyn's departure, for instance, she distracts herself by listing the living and dead inhabitants of Agate Hill and recalling a few of Alice Petree's stories. Her dependence is most striking, though, when she is harassed by Nicky Eck, a visiting friend of Selena's who is a "smooth-talking smooth-haired traveling man" (*OAH*

115). Nicky molests and eventually rapes Molly; in her efforts to avoid him, she retreats to her cubbyhole to create imaginative renderings of her family, who, she writes, “are stuck in time as I am stuck in here” (*OAH* 118). The vignettes she records in isolation, short glimpses of her mother, father, and younger brother, Willie, are not particularly cheerful – her father’s includes the line “he will be blown to smithereens by a bursting shell then gathered up in pieces and buried beneath a green willow tree”—do temporarily distract her from Nicky Eck’s advances. However, when she finally leaves the cubbyhole only to be raped by Nicky, the horror of her present is strong enough to undo the somber magic of her memories. “I will be going away now Dear Diary,” Molly writes, “I do not care that I am leaving my ghosts” (*OAH* 22). Molly does leave Agate Hill for Gatewood Academy and eventually the Bobcat School after her rape, but her ghosts do not disappear.

Molly’s vacillating reliance upon and rejection of memories is deeply tied to her complex feelings about family; her emotional reliance on her memories persists, with a few interruptions, largely because they are the only access she has to most of her biological family. That Molly uses even dark stories from her parents’ pasts to distract herself suggests the comfort that she takes in the mere idea of having a family. She would rather think of her father “blown to smithereens” than not think of him at all. Still, as Molly ages and grows, there are times when she distances herself from her ghosts. When she leaves Agate Hill for Gatewood Academy, for instance, Molly immerses herself in the social life of boarding school, spending holidays with the family of her friend Eliza and receiving “gentleman caller[s]” (*OAH* 193). However, despite her efforts to dismiss her ghosts, they return, unbidden, in

disruptive ways. Selena's son, Godfrey, finds her at school to tell her about Spence's death, and the news sends Molly into a near-catatonic state. As her friend and teacher Agnes writes, "the incident has brought back sad memories from her childhood which might have best been forgotten" (*OAH* 178); Molly is thrust back into the past by the news of Spence, and writes Mary White about "giving up and going to join [her] ghost family" (*OAH* 182). The extreme reaction that Molly has to Spence's death suggests that, despite external signs that she has left her family's past behind at Agate Hill, Molly is still one letter or visit away from being overtaken by it again. She is visited by the ghosts of the past again at her Gatewood Academy graduation ceremony, where she is surrounded by the families of her classmates. "No one had come to commencement for me, no one was missing me now," she writes to Mary White. "No matter how much I have tried to fool myself, in that instant I knew the truth. I am still an orphan girl, loose in the world, and do you know what, Mary White? I like it that way!" (*OAH* 198). After her paralysis at the news of Spence's death, Molly is better able to handle visitations from her ghosts; she is still devastated by the absence of her family, but she identifies herself with them rather than trying to distance herself from them.

It is when Molly marries Jacky Jarvis and begins a new family in the North Carolina that her relationship to her memories and ghosts truly changes. Consumed by her passionate love for Jacky and devastated by the loss of her babies, Molly seems to live in the present rather than the past. I use "seems" here because *On Agate Hill* never provides a firsthand, contemporaneous account of Molly and Jacky's marriage; impressions and stories from that time are instead glimpsed through

court testimony, letters and diary entries Molly drafted after Jacky's death, and the lyrics of a song. Still, Smith hints that Jacky will enable Molly to move on from her family's history as soon as the two meet. Molly immediately tells Jacky all about her past, revealing details to him that previously had lived only in her diary and letters. Molly's talking suggests the strength of her connection to Jacky, and its literary precedent in Smith's novels also implies that Molly will achieve some degree of healing through it. When Smith's characters, such as Sally of *Oral History* and Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies* find a person to whom they can, and do, speak freely, they flourish and grow. While Molly has Jacky, she is too busy and engaged to be ruled by her ghosts. When she loses him, though, and is tried for his murder, Molly would rather return to her old ghosts than live in her marital home without Jacky. "I can't live here anymore, not after all that has happened," she tells BJ, Jacky's brother who was his actual killer (*OAH* 325). Molly's reaction contrasts starkly with her earlier duty to safeguard family memories at Agate Hill, a difference that she poetically explains:

I remembered how, as a girl, I thought I could not leave Agate Hill, that I could not leave my ghosts. Now I understood that love does not reside in places, neither in the Capulets' tomb nor the dales of Arcady nor the Kingdom by the Sea nor in any of those poems that Mary White and I read so long ago, love lives not in places nor even bodies but in the spaces between them, the long and lovely sweep of air and sky, and in the living heart and memory until that is gone too, and we are all of us wanderers, as we have always been, upon the earth. I was free to go (328).

Molly returns to her memories after Jacky's death, but this time, her husband is one of the ghosts whom she recalls. In prison, Molly recollects, "I was too busy remembering Jacky, memorizing him, every inch of his body, every expression on his face" (*OAH* 313).

Molly has cause to mourn and memorize Jacky, as he is the great love of her life. Their marriage suggests what Ivy Rowe might have had, had she been able to keep Honey Breeding. Cook argues that “Jacky, like Honey, is a ‘back door man...a wanderer, a free spirit” (Cook PAGE). Jacky is a musician, and he gives Molly a community by taking her to live near his extended family in the mountain hamlet of Plain View. Though their passion is never in doubt, Molly does not change Jacky’s restless spirit. Wrecked by the death of their two-year old daughter, Christabel, and a heartbreaking number of stillbirths, he begins multiple affairs, at least one of which results in a handful of illegitimate children with a woman named Icy Hinshaw. Molly’s response to Jacky’s infidelities suggests the depths of her love for him. After Jacky has died, Molly goes to see his children, and then asks BJ to give Icy and her children the home where she and Jacky lived. “Give them this house and take care of them,” she says, “for they are Jacky’s. They are yours” (*OAH* 325). Theirs has not been an easy or conventional marriage, but, on her deathbed, Molly does not regret it. “I am glad I gave all my heart,” she writes, “I would do it again” (*OAH* 359).

When Molly, now in her forties, returns to Agate Hill to find Simon Black on his deathbed, she reaches a relative peace with the ghosts of her past, a group which now includes Jacky and Christabel. Molly grapples with her memories and her identity in the old house, a process catalyzed by learning new information about her family’s past even as she mourns her most recent losses. Simon Black’s letter, for instance, which Molly reads after his death, explains his relationship with Alice, and helps Molly to feel a connection with her long-dead mother. What really enables Molly to more ably coexist with her ghosts, though, is her embrace of the living

alongside the dead. Rejecting the isolation that she sought at Agate Hill as a girl, Molly waits twenty years to enter her cubbyhole, busying herself instead with Simon, Henry, and Juney. Rather than repeatedly terming herself a “ghost” or a steward of memories, Molly bestows more active, literal titles upon herself. “I am the one who adds up the sums and tells the stories,” she writes in her diary, “Henry is the one who drives the car” (*OAH* 354). Molly certainly does not forget her ghosts, but she is more willing to feel love and purpose in the world of the living; she accepts Henry and Juney, especially, as family. She manages, in her final years, to create a fulfilling life by cobbling together an unconventional sort of family in the crumbling remains of Agate Hill.

IDENTITY AND EDUCATION

Because *On Agate Hill* follows Molly Petree from her adolescence until she is old, it chronicles circumstances and events that cause shifts in her identity. Though these shifts often are catalyzed by changes in Molly’s physical, geographical location, they also occur in response to loves, losses, and formal education. Molly ends her diary at the same place, Agate Hill, where she began it, and the circularity of her physical journey mirrors that of her identity over time; at the end of her life, Molly feels like she has returned to the self of her girlhood. Smith shows us about Molly’s subjectivity mostly through the character’s own writing, but other voices, such as those of teachers and friends, occasionally provide glimpses of Molly from different perspectives. Still, Molly’s self-reflexive writing provides a compelling portrait of

her conception of her own identity, which she largely reveals by drawing comparisons between herself and others, women especially, whom she encounters. Molly initially resists being likened to her mother, Alice, even as she relishes her bond with her cousin Mary White and her teacher-turned colleague and friend, Agnes Rutherford. Because Molly inhabits spaces both Southern and Appalachian, her subjectivity suggests similarities and differences between those regions of the country.

In the earliest pages of her diary, Molly defines herself by her family and her isolation. "I am like a ghost girl wafting through this ghost house seen by none," Molly writes, tying herself to her dead relatives rather than to living persons. From her cubbyhole in the plantation, she listens to noises in the house and watches the activity outside. "I can see everything...Everything! But nobody can see me" (*OAH* 19). Molly's isolation is appealing to her because of her dislike of some other residents of Agate Hill, but it also allows her to indulge her curiosity about everything and everyone, a trait she recognizes. "I mean to write in secrecy and stelhth the truth as I see it," she writes, "I will write it all down every true thing in black and white upon the page, for evil or good it is my own true life and I WILL have it" (*OAH* 7-8). Molly's early emphasis on truth and knowing implies that, though she is only thirteen years old, she already is disillusioned with a perceived lack of truth or insight in the world. Her defiant claims to her life, too, suggest a precocious dedication to her subjectivity, fluid as it may be. That Molly variously refers to herself, in the space of just one page, as "an orphan girl," "a spitfire and a burden," a "refugee girl," and a "ruby-throated hummingbird" suggests that Molly is

trying on identities and self-concepts as she writes, aided by her vivid imagination in her search for self-definition (*OAH* 7). What her metaphors suggest she has figured out is that she is isolated and unsettled, still ungrounded after an early life “dragged from pillar to post” (*OAH* 7).

The role into which Molly most frequently casts herself is guardian of her family’s past. One important consequence of this role for Molly’s identity, though, is the comparisons it causes her to draw between herself – and the deceased family members with whom she aligns herself – and the people who replace her family at Agate Hill. I primarily refer here to Selena, who steadily assumes control of the plantation in the absence of such women as Alice Petree and Fanny Hall. Even before Aunt Cecilia arrives to highlight Selena’s transgression of social norms, Molly expresses her resentment of the housekeeper-turned-lady of the house. “Selena has got notions,” Molly writes, “in fact she is full to bursting with them” (*OAH* 27). Using the language of the privileged, Molly accuses Selena of trying to “worm her way into this house” and describes her hold on Junius as “like poison ivy” (*OAH* 28). Molly’s language is more emotionally charged when she sees Selena wearing Alice Petree’s jewelry. “It kills me to see Mammas jade ring from the Orient on the little finger of Selenas fat hand,” she writes, “and the coral bead necklace around her neck, I wish it would choke her dead” (*OAH* 13). Molly resents Selena’s attempts to fill the places of Fannie Hall and Alice Petree, but it is not clear, despite her strong language, that she feels this way because of Selena’s social status. In fact, Molly frequently expresses her admiration of Selena’s strength and work ethic, and herself prefers outdoor labor to relaxing indoors as her mother once did. Molly writes that Selena is “a tall

woman strong as an ox” who “can work all day long in the field then split wood like a man” (*OAH* 28). This description is as close to praising Selena as she can come, though, until she is much older. When Molly returns to Agate Hill and discovers the buried bones of Selena’s husband, Mr. Voegell, she understands that Selena killed him and finds a point of identification in that desperate act. “Perhaps this is why I hated her so much,” Molly muses, “because I knew – even then – that I was exactly like her, skin and bone, tooth and claw. I would have done anything at all to have my Jacky” (*OAH* 350). Though we may disagree with Molly’s self-characterization, her admission of likeness with Selena suggests the perspective she has gained by living away from Agate Hill.

Despite her initial rejection of Selena in favor of Fannie and her mother, Alice, Molly is also disinclined to identify much with those women in her early diary entries. She writes of Fannie with warmth and love, but resents her dedication to motherhood, which ultimately caused her death. “I will NEVER have a baby myself,” Molly writes, recalling the delivery of her dead cousin Lewis and Fannie’s death soon after. “Babys are always dangerous but it is even more dangerous when you are old,” she writes. “But everybody except me wants them, it is hard to see why” (*OAH* 9). Molly’s ambivalence about Alice seems less derived from her motherhood and more from her fragile constitution; Alice was frail for much of Molly’s life and depended on the care of the slaves who travelled with her from her South Carolina plantation home to Agate Hill. “Mamma loved gold jewelry but I am not a thing like Mamma,” Molly asserts, “I am NOT. I like rocks instead” (*OAH* 12). Though she frequently quotes her mother and mines her vocabulary – “For ever and utterly

gone, as Mamma used to say,” she writes at one point – Molly’s feelings about Alice are complex (*OAH* 20). She admires her mother’s beauty and kindness, but does not want to duplicate Alice’s life. Molly’s disconnect with her own mother and Fannie is reflected in her own devastating attempts to become a mother. After the death of her first child, Christabel, at age two, Molly loses five other babies, none of whom lives for more than three weeks. “I never once thought I would want a child,” Molly tells BJ, Jacky’s cousin, “but now I want it the worst in the world....It is all I want” (296). Molly’s desire to be a mother, and her subsequent reconciliation with the memory of her own mother, grow out of her biological and emotional maturation, but also from her belief that love and family are attainable for her.

It is not until Molly, aged and living again at Agate Hill, reads Simon Black’s letter that she becomes reconciled to her memory of Alice. Molly reveals this peace when she writes in her diary about a new addition to her collection of relics. “It is a heart-shaped stirrup forged by Simon Black for my mother,” she says, “I know all about it now” (*OAH* 333). Added to Molly’s fine and expensive keepsakes of Alice – “the green liqueur glass from Venice, my mother’s silver hairbrush” – the simple, old stirrup represents an aspect of Alice’s life that makes her a more relatable and sympathetic figure for Molly. Her mother was not simply a plantation princess surrounded by faithful devotees and luxury; she also was a feeling woman who was tempted to give it all up for Simon Black. Molly’s enormous love for Jacky prepares her to understand Alice’s choice. When she achieves a better understanding of Alice, Molly is finally allowed to be a mother herself by caring for Juney. Smith symbolizes this shift in Molly’s role through the language that Juney uses to refer to his

caretaker. "Over the years," Molly writes, "he has gone from calling me Molly, or something like Molly, to Ma, to Mamma, to Mammalee" (*OAH* 354). As Cook puts it, "Juney is the consolidation of all the children Molly has buried, both daughter and son, child and adult" (Cook 220). Though finding Juney does not undo the pain of losing her biological children, he allows Molly to experience a sort of motherhood.

If Molly sometimes defines herself in opposition to other women, she is equally prone to aligning her subjectivity with that of other characters, some of whom are surprising. The earliest instance of this is Molly's friendship with Mary White, her spunky but frail cousin visiting from Alabama. "The reason I have not written for so long Dear Diary," Molly writes after Mary White's arrival, "is that now I am a real girl with a real friend who...does everything with me" (43). Her friendship with Mary changes Molly's self conception: she sees herself as "real" and even special instead of as an unlucky, lonely ghost when Mary White is with her. "Mary White knows all about fairies and now I do too," Molly writes, and she is excited that the fairies choose to appear to her and not others (44). Though the girls' preoccupation with fairies may seem frivolous, it infuses Molly's previously grim life with a sense of magic, and the power of their supernatural visitations sustains Molly throughout her life. When Mary White has gone and Agate Hill is frozen and dark, for instance, a fairy keeps Molly from giving up on her life. "Wake up Molly Petree, he said in his high chirping voice. Go home....I got up from the snow and hoisted my buckets and headed home" (105). ²⁵ As Byrd has written, fairies are representative

²⁵ As Byrd as noted, the scene where Molly longs to simply go to sleep in the snow recalls a part of *Fair and Tender Ladies*. "In both situations," she writes, "a spiritual force urges the young girls to return to life" (204).

of Molly's imagination, and the fact that Molly shares them with Mary White underscores the power of their bond. Molly writes to Mary White for most of her life, though she seldom receives replies and knows it is likely that her sickly friend has died. Like Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and her institutionalized sister, Silvaney, Molly and Mary are entwined in one another's subjectivity; Mary is Molly's touchstone as well as her imaginative partner.

The more surprising of her intense identifications is Molly's relationship with Simon Black, who loved her mother and transfers that care to Molly. Initially, Molly resents Simon's intrusions into her life. Because she does not understand why he follows and seeks to direct her, she rebuffs his efforts. When he comes to visit her at the Bobcat school, for instance, Molly's friend and colleague Agnes witnesses their heated conversation, after which Molly stamps her foot and tells Agnes that Black merely was "a stranger" who "had lost his way" (OAH 242). However, when Black purchases Agate Hill and Jacky has died, Molly finally feels ready to face her benefactor and her past. "I have been waiting for this," Molly writes when she sees him again, "It was the last thing left to happen to me" (OAH 328-9).

As Cook has written, Molly has been "mothered," whether or not she wanted to be, by Black for most of her life; after the loss of her own children and adult family, she returns to Agate Hill ready to mother him in kind. Black is ill when she arrives, and she throws herself into his care. "I stayed with him until his death," Molly writes, "flesh to flesh, bone to bone, pressing my body against...the whole long fragile length of him" (OAH 333). Though Molly does not explicitly explain what changed her feelings about Simon Black from resentment to intense understanding,

the change itself is unmistakable. Upon his death, she writes: “I lay beside him while all the changes took place, his ravaged body cooling, his thin arm growing stiff across my breast. We are like a sarcophagus, I thought...Now we are the sarcophagus itself” (*OAH* 334). Even before she has read Simon’s letter detailing his connection to Alice and his motivation for shadowing Molly, she feels eternally, supernaturally, bound to the man.

Molly’s changed feelings about Simon Black and maternal figures in her early life hint at a larger evolution in her perspective that is evident upon her return to Agate Hill. The most profound expression of this shift is Molly’s sense that, despite being absent for decades, she is the same essential self that she was when she left Agate Hill as a teenager. “I thought I would not know her anymore,” Molly writes of her younger self, “and yet I find that I am her, just as wild and full of spite and longing as ever, as I still am” (*OAH* 332). She continues: “inside I am just the same and I’ll swear it, still crazy with love and pain, still wanting who knows what.” Molly feels differently about events and people in her young life, but she does not believe that shifts in her perspective constitute a significant change in who she is. What she does single out as different, though, is the middle years of her life, when she lived at Gatewood, Bobcat, and with Jacky. “I am not sure whatever happened to that smart girl in between, the one who kept the Bobcat School and worked at the store wrapping parcels and adding up sums in her head,” she writes. “Oh Molly Petree, who were you?” (*OAH* 333).²⁶ The novel suggests, by its arrangement, that it agrees

²⁶ Locklear argues that, by positioning Molly Petree as both teacher and student, Smith “recasts the invasive teacher figure.” Because “Molly’s continued exposure to new literacies infuses her with a love of learning that she takes with her when she

with Molly; while most of Molly's time at Agate Hill is narrated in her own, distinct, voice, the sections in which she is away from the plantation largely are told through the voices of others. Thus, it seems that Molly's journey away from and returning to Agate Hill has left her, in terms of her subjectivity, back where she started. What she has gained, emotionally and educationally, however, leaves her better able to live with the events of her and her family's pasts.

If there is a striking difference between the Molly Petree of 1872 and of 1927, it is in the terms she uses to define her own identity. Once she has grappled with her ghosts and assumed care of Juney, Molly conceives of herself in simple, practical terms rather than with the abstract language she chose as a child. The "ruby-throated hummingbird" and "ghost girl" has been replaced by a matter-of-fact role player. "I am the one who arranges the flowers," she writes, and "Henry is the one who will drive the car" (*OAH* 357). In the final section of the novel, Molly frequently describes herself in terms of her actions, and nearly always includes the actions of her cobbled-together family members, Henry and Juney. "I am the one who arranges the flowers" she repeats in another diary entry. "I am the one who tells the stores, Henry is the one who drives the car" (*OAH* 359). Molly's feelings about what she must do are also noticeably more grounded. As a girl, she worried about leaving behind the ghosts of her family's past if she left Agate Hill. As an older woman, though, Molly's concern is for the physical and emotional well-being of Juney, whom she can't imagine leaving. While considering how important her care is for Juney,

teaches," Locklear writes, "Smith moves past the destructive pedagogical model represented by Richard Burlage (in *Oral History*) and Miss Torrington (in *Fair and Tender Ladies*) and instead presents a more hopeful prototype of instruction for mountain students" (Locklear 176).

she writes, "So I can't die, for then who will do it? I think about this all the time" (*OAH* 353). Though the Molly of 1927 is still worried for others, this time she invests her worries in immediate, non-abstract concerns. That she has not abandoned her imagination entirely, though, is suggested by her roles as storyteller and arranger of flowers.

If Molly Petree were the last protagonist of a Lee Smith novel – though there is no reason to expect that she will be – she would provide a fitting and satisfying capstone for Smith's fiction. Molly encounters nearly every difficulty and joy that Smith has addressed in her work. She contends, for instance, with memories of a deceased and ladylike mother whom she both resents and loves. She struggles with loss. She derives her identity in part from her literacy, and questions the norms of Christianity. She writes her own story, though she is never considered an artist. She is violated by one man, but goes on to have a passionate marriage with another of her choosing. Molly even takes part in a courtroom mystery: who killed Jacky Jarvis? In Molly, Smith shows the universality of her vision. Whether in the contemporary South, the Civil War-era South, or Smith's Appalachian home, the large-scale challenges for thoughtful and passionate women remain much the same.

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