Memory in Threatened Places: Oral History and the Fiction of Lee Smith

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This essay explores the capacity of memory and oral history to memorialise places threatened by environmental devastation and alteration. Juxtaposing US author Lee Smith's oral history *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (2000) and novels *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985) and *Saving Grace* (1995), the essay reveals the complexities of memory- and meaning-making in the face of the relocation and reconstruction of a town threatened by perennial and devastating flooding. Interrogating the role of place in stimulating and sustaining collective memory, the essay argues that oral history and fiction illuminate each other; the opportunity to memorialise place shapes the narratives they tell and problematises the future spaces they imagine. The essay demonstrates how Smith's oral historiography and fiction remembers a threatened landscape and compels readers of both sorts of texts to rethink the relationship of memory and place. Oral history illustrates the communal and social value of the process of telling stories about places that were, while stories and novels permit the writer to shed further light on cultural, social and geographical spaces and help make sense of the places that will be and the human communities who inhabit them.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the relationships between oral history and place through the example of a coalmining community in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States, where worsening flooding of the town's civic and commercial centre by the river that bisected it threatened the town's survival. While a cyclical occurrence, such flooding has been worsening due to erosion exacerbated by the devastation of surrounding mountainsides by coalmining and human development in the river's floodplain and, in recent decades, intensified precipitation events, likely aggravated by climate change. In the face of such repeated environmental catastrophe, federal and state governments collaborated to relocate the town centre and rechannel the river. In this transition, community members turned to oral history to document residents' memories of the existing community and place. This decision offers the opportunity to explore the capacity of oral history to attend to the ways in which people remember and narrate their relationships to environments, in particular under the stress of disaster and restoration. To that end, this essay explores the following questions. Why might environmental catastrophe, re-engineering, and alteration spur the production and consumption of oral history? As the practice and product of oral history depend on place, what can neuroscience and psychology tell us about the efficacy of memory to remember places – in particular, those places no longer habitable or differently inhabited? Given the complexities and challenges of remembering places, even and despite engaging in and disseminating oral history, how might literature fill the gap?

As a scholar of literary studies, I consider these questions by bringing into conversation oral history and literature as a means of assessing further how place and memory interact, collide and unfold. I will analyse the collaboratively produced *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* alongside Lee Smith's prolific fiction set in the US Appalachian Mountains.[1] The oral history project *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* served the purposes of engaging a community in oral historiography, midwifing a transition to a new environment and preserving a community's

1 Lee Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: Tryon Publishing Company Inc., 2000).

memory. By comparison, Smith's novels surface repressed voices and stories, memorialise and re-memorialise the places that define their Appalachian settings, and, ultimately, offer an imagination of place and environment that grapples with ongoing change and transformation. Smith's work – in the realms of oral history as well as fiction, for which she is more commonly celebrated – offers a unique opportunity for considering the profound emplacement of human beings. Through an analysis of these varied sources, this article examines human attachment to places, an attachment that is sometimes so profound that separation from them lays us low with homesickness. In so doing, it raises questions of the sufficiency of relocation or recreation to quell the solastalgia – or distress caused by environmental change – that is set to increase as our planet continues to suffer the effects of anthropogenic climate change.[2]

Figure 1 Aerial view of flooding on the Levisa Fork River in Grundy, Virginia, in 1984. Photograph courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers. Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grundy_Virginia_flood_1984.jpg.

2 For further information, see https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18027145/.

'WE'RE BUILDING A NEW TOWN'

In the once vibrant US coalmining town of Grundy, Virginia, people calibrated personal memories against the almost clockwork regularity of the flooding of the Levisa Fork River, a 'natural disaster' that happened about every 20 years. Since 1929, the Levisa Fork has inundated the town nine times, with the worst floods in 1957 and 1977. The 1977 flood, for example, killed three people and caused US$15 million in damage. Residents lived in fear of continued and devastating flooding: 'This is the 20th year', a resident told *The Washington Post* in 1997. 'If we don't have one this year, doesn't mean we won't have one next year. If it's as bad as '77, Grundy will be gone'.[3] Residents today, however, can frame their individual remembrance in terms of the completion of one of the United States' most intricate flood control projects, in which the town's commercial district was razed, the steep mountain 'benched', and the river rechannelled.[4] The town's fateful future thus occasioned, in the mid-1990s, a confrontation with their collective memory of the place in advance of the space that would be. Part of this reckoning took the form of a collaboration between US author and Grundy expatriate Lee Smith, Grundy High School teacher Debbie Raines and 28 of her students, and Buchanan County Public Library librarian Pat Hatfield.

Sitting on the Courthouse Bench consists of interviews of 40 Grundy residents, selected due to their residing in the part of town soon to be relocated. In pairs assigned by Raines, 28 high school students conducted the interviews from 1998 to 2000,

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3 Ellen Nakashima, 'In Grundy, VA., a Debate Ebbs and Flows; Some Residents Want to Move Flood-Prone Town to Higher Ground; Others Are Wary, and Funding Is Uncertain', *The Washington Post*, 6 May 1997, B1.

4 Beginning in 1998 (the same year Raines' students began interviewing Grundy residents), the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Virginia Department of Transportation flattened the top of a nearby mountain on which it constructed a 'new' Grundy (anchored by a Walmart atop a two-storey parking garage, surrounded by a Verizon, Taco Bell and gas station, among a handful of other retailers), using the earth displaced from the mountaintop to construct an eight-foot levee along the river and to raise some surrounding land, concluding with the construction of a federally mandated four-lane highway atop the levee. Bridges across the Levisa Fork connect the 'new' Grundy atop the flattened mountainside to the former downtown, where the Buchanan County Courthouse and some prominent churches remain. According to Francis X. Clines in *The New York Times* (2001), 'The Army Corps of Engineers … says that in 65 years of flood control projects, this is the first time something so elaborate has been attempted by carving fresh space to save a town in such a tight turn of steep mountains and narrow hollows'. Upon completion, in 2008, the project cost more than $250 million dollars – 'about $250,000 for every man, woman, and child in Grundy,' Debra McCown noted in *The Bristol Herald-Courier* in 2008 as construction concluded.

Figure 2 A view of Grundy, circa 2005. Photograph courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Grundy2005.jpg.

typically in interviewees' homes. In an appendix, Smith and Raines provide a sample letter for interviewers, tips for conducting the interview (such as becoming knowledgeable about the interviewee, practising the questions they will ask, practising how to use the tape recorder, and notetaking), instructions on transcribing the interviews (such as 'writ[ing] down their actual words', ignoring grammatical errors or incomplete sentences, and cutting repeated phrases or irrelevant digressions), and a sample release form. Raines and Smith instruct student interviewers to compose 30 to 40 questions to ask their interviewees, providing sample questions such as name, birthplace and date, parents' names and occupations, number of siblings, amusements, school and work history, hobbies and interests, and perceptions of childhood, with additional questions 'related specifically to our subjects' lives and experiences in Grundy over the years'. After further editing, the interviews appear in the book in a consistent form: the interviewee's name, then an epigraph taken from the interview, a brief preface introducing the interviewee and the setting in which the interview took place, followed by interviewers' questions and the interviewee's responses.[5]

5 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 248, 250.

The majority of interviewees were male, a majority of interviewers and interviewees were white, and the majority of the collection's images feature the built environment. Tables 1 and 2 describe the gender and racial or ethnic demographics of participants, and Table 3 suggests the extent to which the oral history's imagery focuses on built environments (such as streets and buildings) and people instead of natural places.[6]

	MEN	WOMEN
Interviewees	24	16
Interviewers	7	21

Table 1 Gender

	WHITE	NON-WHITE OR INDETERMINATE
Interviewees	38	2
Interviewers	26	2

Table 2 Race

SUBJECT MATTER OF THE IMAGE	NUMBER
The image's primary subject is the built environment.	70
The image's primary subject is people.	41
The image's primary subject is nature, without indication of the presence of people.	1
The image's primary subject is unclear.	6

Table 3 Images

The 'unusual plan' of terraforming and relocation that motivated the oral historiography and its publication had both supporters and detractors. The former said the plan would save Grundy and give people a reason to live there: 'The trick all along has been how to do this without killing the town you're trying to save', Grundy town manager Chuck Crabtree said. 'This is survival. We have to make it happen'. Opponents, however, held that the project was too risky; the town, they said, would not

6 Whereas the collection's racial demographics reflect those of Buchanan County, Virginia, the county in which Grundy is located, its gender demographics do not, as Buchanan County is approximately evenly split, with 51 per cent of residents men and 49 per cent women (US Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Buchanan County, Virginia [n.d.]. Available at https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/buchanancountyvirginia/IPE120219. Accessed 3 June 2021). The collection's privileging of the built environment also is striking and suggests its impetus to record for posterity environments set for demolition.

be able to depend on the state legislature to fund the project years down the road, and they doubted that people would fill the new homes and offices promised to be built. Michael (Mickey) McGlothlin, a member of a prominent coalmining family, lamented the project's impact on the community's landscape: 'This project will leave this place looking like a rock quarry', he said. 'God did a fine job making this valley. The part of Grundy that doesn't look so good is because of man's work'.[7]

As these sentiments suggest, people on both sides saw the project as a critical juncture in the town's collective memory as well as sense of place. Smith's work in spurring *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* offers a compromise between the two positions: it creates a means of preserving the community's memory at the same time that it attempts to forge a new collective memory, in the form of a stronger kinship with each other in an altered place. As Smith illustrates, both projects – flood control as well as oral history – reiterate that memory and place are intransient:

> 'The only thing you can count on in this world', my granddaddy used to say, 'is death and taxes'. But that couldn't be true, I felt, looking around at the rugged contours of the place where I was born. This was my geography. It *would* be like this forever. Now it looks like my granddaddy was right after all. For Grundy is about to change, and change so dramatically that it will never again be the town we have all known, the town where we grew up and went to school and came to pay our taxes, where we got a marriage license or bought our son a bike for Christmas. That town will be gone forever. The only thing left of it will be our memories.[8]

The oral histories that Smith's remembrance prefaces emerge from the compulsion she and others felt to save for posterity the landscape that created them. Whether those memories of the places they encoded can persevere in the face of wholesale

7 Francis X. Clines, 'Past Floods Push Town to Stake Its Future on Higher Ground', *The New York Times*, 7 August 2001; Louis Jacobson, 'Flood-Prone Appalachian Town to Move Mountain, Then Downtown', *Planning* 68, no. 4 (2002): 30.

8 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 17.

reconstruction of the human-built environment and the ecosystems in which it existed remains another question entirely.

ORAL HISTORY AND THE MEMORY OF PLACE

In large measure, the practice and product of oral history hinge on place: interviewers often ask participants to recall where they grew up, where they went to school, where they worked and where they worshiped, the very questions Smith and Raines instruct their interviewers to ask. They ask their interviewees to talk specifically about those places, from home and school to work and church, and then to generalise outwards: to recall and reconstruct the phenomena and contexts occasioned and instantiated by and within those places. In their list of sample questions, Smith and Raines suggest asking questions such as, 'Where did you go to school', followed by, 'What was it like going to school there?' Like most other oral history projects, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* instructs interviewers to 'always ask *very* specific questions. For instance: "Where did you live when you were real little? Describe the house … Did you go to church? Where?"' Oral history work accedes that place holds special significance in the brain, a rank that makes it easier to recall and retrieve than other memories, such as those of events, dates or customs. Much to its credit, oral history embraces the social and relational context of memory of place:

> From the moment we enter the world, we are engaged in spatial cognition, in interacting with the world around us and in constructing mental representations of that world and our own place in it. Yet we do not conceive of the world as a geometer might, as space with three extrinsic orthogonal coordinates that specify the locations of points, objects, or regions. Rather, we adopt different frames of reference and incorporate different elements in constructing mental spaces for the real spaces important in our lives.[9]

In seeming contrast to the way that the brain in fact processes memories of place, oral history work, by emphasising the recollection and retrieval of place, aims in

9 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 247; Barbara Tversky, 'Remembering Spaces', in Endel Tulving and Fergus I.M. Craik (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Memory* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000), 363.

large part for the quantifiable and measurable, as if the ostensible facticity and infallibility of memory of place – of rooms, hallways, layouts, facades, etc. – stands beyond reproach and somehow will make 'true' or 'real' that which the interviewer seeks and which the interviewee offers.

Place – threatened by natural disaster on the one side and radical human-engineered relocation on the other – becomes the thread that sews together *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*. As Smith and Raines explain, 'Our aim is to create an oral history of the town of Grundy before it is forever changed by relocation'; for Smith, such a record of 'recollections' will provide 'something concrete to pin [her] memories onto'. For scholars who consider how a transformed planet can or will be remembered, however, this project's success depends on the accuracy, precision, attention and nuance with which its speakers can recall and articulate the place that is Grundy, even as we grant that the accuracy of memories of place is not central to all research on oral history and place. Sometimes, inaccurate memories can more clearly illuminate subjective attachments to or perceptions of place – a verity Smith likewise imagines, stating, 'These oral histories give us a sense of who we have been, and who we are … perhaps they may help us imagine who we might become', just as she asserts the potential of the project not just to preserve but celebrate the community's 'rich culture'.[10]

The connection between place and memory and any correlation between ease of recall and retrieval and place remains a subject of exploration for psychologists and neuroscientists, with significant implications for the practice of oral history in an era of environmental alteration due to climate change. For this essay, psychological and neuroscientific accounts of the ability of the brain to recall accurate memories of place is crucial, as *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* aims to record an accurate memory of Grundy as a place prior to its relocation. As multiple studies demonstrate, the materiality of place seems to enhance human beings' capacity to retrieve memories of certain locations and environments: 'Places serve as landmarks, important in memory for space. And it appears that memory for places has special qualities not shared by memory for other, even other visual, stimuli … Although remembering

10 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 246, 27, 18.

of locations of places may not be completely effortless or perfect, it is certainly relatively easy'. Moreover, much research points to a neurological basis for the brain's supposed facility in retrieving memory of place: 'The special status of places is reinforced by evidence implicating a region of the parahippocampal cortex dedicated to recognition of them'.[11]

These explanations might seem to point to wholly uncontextualised reasons for remembering place – that is, something about the placeness of a place makes it easier to remember, insofar as 'the operations that encode the frequencies, spatial locations, and time of events' are 'automatic processes' for which 'there appear to be no comparable data concerning disruptions in the processing of frequency, spatial location, or temporal order information'.[12] Yet many people seem to be able to recall 'place' more readily insofar as it functions as a space of constant and consistent social interaction. For example, in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, many interviewees recall the town's Ben Franklin Five and Dime store. Roberta Ratliff, the store's accountant and bookkeeper, seems to remember the store's precise layout: 'every Christmas … we would re-lay the whole store, because we would have to, say, take all the men's hosiery and underwear up and put it over against the wall where the fabrics were in order to lay out the Christmas decorations'. But more than the actual layout of the store, Ratliff's remembering emphasises the people who inhabit the place and the spaces with which they are associated:

> Ellen Clevinger, who had the baby goods counter, and also she worked with a lot of fabrics … Della Turner, and she had the hosiery counter … there was Myrtle Rife, who had glassware, Goldie Matney had hosiery, and Mildred Cook was our candy girl. And Clovis – Clovis was not there when I first started working because he was in the army, but he came back. Then after me, Ruby Sweeton came along. Ruby was into everything. Her main interest was toiletry counters, health and beauty aids.[13]

11 Tversky, 'Remembering Spaces', 365.

12 Lynn Hasher and Rose T. Zacks, 'Automatic and Effortful Processes in Memory', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 108, no. 3 (1979): 360.

13 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 57, 55.

As the store's primary financial authority, who would have overseen pay cheques for dozens of employees over her career at the store, Ratliff would have no excuse for failing to remember the names of the store's employees. But it is significant that her recollection of the store as a place depends largely on her recollection of the individuals who peopled the store, using their roles and duties – and the spaces in the store allocated to those duties – as a sort of mnemonic device for the spatial arrangement of the store.

Much research on such connections between memory and place focuses on individuals' ability to recall sets of cues in locations other than the ones in which they received them. An early experiment to probe possible links between memory and spatial context entailed the testing of memory retention in skin divers. Researchers gave one set of divers a list of words while they were in the water and another set of divers a list of words while they were on land. The divers then were asked to recall the words, either on land or in the water. Those who were asked to recall the words where they had been told them (whether on land or underwater) were more likely to be able to remember all of them: 'Recall is better if the environment of original learning is reinstated'. Referring to subsequent studies that demonstrated 'striking specificity of matching encoding and retrieval contexts', Norman E. Spear and David C. Riccio asserted 'two principal effects of context on memory':

> (1) if the context in which the memory must be retrieved differs from that in which the memory was acquired, it is likely that accuracy of retention will be impaired; and (2) if the context of both memory retrieval and memory acquisition are the same and also quite distinctive, retention might be more accurate than if these contexts were the same but fairly common.[14]

These generalities vacillate between place as specific and unique as opposed to general and categorical – that is, 'Beverly Hills High School' versus 'high school'.

14 D.R. Godden and A.D. Baddeley, 'Context-dependent Memory in Two Natural Environments: On Land and Underwater', *British Journal of Psychology* 66, no. 3 (1975): 330. Accessed 15 November 2020, Business Source Ultimate (5699298); Norman E. Spear and David C. Riccio, *Memory: Phenomena and Principles* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), 55.

A provocative counterfactual might ask of Smith, Raines and the Grundy residents interviewed in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*: If this oral history project were completed after the destruction of the town and subsequent rebuilding, how might individuals' memories of specific places differ? Would, for instance, one's recollection of the Five and Dime – the store Smith's father owned, and where Smith, Ratliff and others worked and shopped – be refracted (nostalgically or otherwise) by the construction of its replacement (a Walmart) in the 'new' Grundy? The potential responses to these queries complicate the work of oral history on a changing planet. The slippage between actual, original spaces and spaces reconstructed (or rendered uninhabitable by climate change), both in memory and in fact, produces a palpable unease in the project of transcribing and transmitting memory, for the interviewee, interviewer and audience alike.

Subsequent experiments have both corroborated and failed to replicate correlation between the environment in which memory is encoded and the environment in which memory is retrieved. In a meta-analysis of incidental environmental context-dependent memory in humans, Steven M. Smith and Edward Vela assert that 'in spite of some failed attempts to find environmental context-dependent memory effects, it is clear … that … the effects are reliably found'. They state:

> Memories of experiences may vary in how much they are affected by environmental surroundings, both when events are originally experienced and when events are remembered. In some cases, learning and remembering appear to be greatly affected by background environments, and in other circumstances, incidental surroundings influence learning and remembering much less.

Attentive to 'local versus global contexts', in which 'local contexts surround only the to-be-learned stimulus and can change quickly, [and] global contexts include a wider range of the surrounding environment, often contain[ing] contextual clues in multiple modalities and change very slowly', Michel Juhani Wälti, Daniel Graham Woolley and Nicole Wenderoth confirm that 'the process of memorizing information in everyday situations represents an overlap of coherent events, where context is usually closely related to the information and consists of a variety of sensory,

cognitive and emotional features' – so much so that contemporary innovations in virtual reality are not sufficient to eliciting context-dependent memory.[15]

In replicating as well as failing to replicate environmental context-dependent memory, such findings nonetheless suggest the validity of memories of place evoked through oral history, as Henry L. Roediger III and Melissa J. Guynn imply in their assessment of the research:

> Many researchers use only very short retention intervals between study and test of material, whereas the most compelling examples from our lives occur when the retention interval is very great (when we return to a place from which we have been absent for years). In addition, the type of materials, conditions of learning, and many other factors differ between the naturally occurring cases and the laboratory experiments.[16]

The significance of a certain place – the place where one was educated or worked, for example, or the place where one proposed to one's spouse – compel an individual's initial and ongoing attention, just as a longer interval between being in a place and the instance of its remembrance might strengthen the memory of the setting thanks to the individual's special effort to encode and re-encode it, as a means of assuring that it is never lost. Such might be the case in recollections garnered by oral historians: idealised or otherwise, memories of significant places might remain as accurate and fulsome as if they had just been made. Indeed, participants in a project like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* – where the importance of securing a fixed memory of a place becomes especially urgent – must be diligent and painstaking in re-creating the places of the past, in order to preserve those environs in perpetuity.

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15 Steven M. Smith and Edward Vela, 'Environmental Context-Dependent Memory: A Review and Meta-analysis', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 8, no. 2 (2002): 215, 203; Michel Juhani Wälti, Daniel Graham Woolley and Nicole Wenderoth, 'Reinstating Verbal Memories with Virtual Contexts: Myth of Reality?' *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019): 2, 17. Available at https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214540. Accessed 15 November 2020.

16 Henry L. Roediger III and Melissa J. Guynn, 'Accessing Information in Long-Term Memory,' in Elizabeth Ligon Bjork and Robert A. Bjork (eds), *Memory* (San Diego: Academic Press Inc., 1996), 211.

The artefacts they produce – the volume that contains the interviews – thus become an aid to memory, fodder for the (re)imagination of the (old) Grundy. As psychologists Mary M. Smyth et al. state, 'It is not necessary for the physical context to be reinstated if the subjects can imagine it'.[17] The implication, then, is that the people of Grundy or we readers of *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* do not in actuality 'need' the 'original' Grundy so long as we have the oral history. In a literary critic's paradise, as it were, we have the text, and it reigns supreme in the construction and articulation of meaning and memory. (Like the author, the setting too is dead!) But the liability then becomes the gaps or silences – or, perhaps, in a remembrance of a place destroyed or yet to be destroyed, the mistaken resonances or hyperarticulations – inherent in any text, especially in a text that strives toward 'fact' and 'objective remembrance'. *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, for example, elides the presences and contributions of racial, ethnic and sexual minorities. While it presents the remembrances of a range of people from a wide range of socioeconomic classes, it fails to acknowledge or report class conflicts, socioeconomic inequalities and socioeconomic stratification. Finally, it does not represent women on an equal footing with men. Such omission and expungement have the effect of privileging certain places: the text mentions what goes on in the radio station, insurance office, or newspaper bureau – not what goes on in homes, blue-collar workplaces and other settings of the disempowered.

Moreover, such elisions have real consequences for the creation, perpetuation and management of memory. In psychological terms, the creation of memory is continuous, reverberatory and self-fulfilling: 'In effect a new entry is made when an old memory is recalled since the system will make a new record of the use to which the memory is put'. In other words, the telling of a memory makes a new memory; the retelling or re-remembering of that re-memory makes yet another memory, *ad infinitum*:

> Retrieving something from memory increases the likelihood that it will be remembered again in the future. The act of retrieval is itself a processing

17 Mary M. Smyth, Alan F. Collins, Peter E. Morris and Philip Levy, *Cognition in Action*, 2nd ed. (Hove, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 268.

> event and the result will be to alter the ease with which the item can be recalled again … After a memory has been activated it is likely that the amount of input necessary to reactivate the memory in the future is lowered. In the future less specific information will be required before the memory is made available.[18]

The act of articulating memories for an oral history project reinforces the strength and stability of those memories; reading or hearing of those memories again, after the publication of the oral history project, reinforces the memory of the memory – thus solidifying the vigour of the secondary memory, perhaps at the expense of the first. The consequences of elided memory are grave: not only do the memories contained in an oral history project perpetuate the elision; the process of memory-gathering and memory-managing, as exemplified by the oral historians, archivists, publishers, and others, instantiates (and re-instantiates) such exclusion.

Enter the work of fiction. In many ways, fiction functions in much the same way as an oral history project like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* in memorialising a certain place. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, inks the Mississippi River permanently onto the US consciousness, whereas William Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County stands in for the rural, backward US South in many people's minds.[19] Smith's literary output does the same for the Appalachian Mountains: since *Black Mountain Breakdown*, she has returned to her roots in the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies. Her perspicacious and meticulous attention to the ridges and hollers (a word for 'hollows', or small valleys, in regional US dialect) that set the stage for her life brings the region as much to life in a reader's mind as any oral history project, even *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*. Their narrative structure – alternating between individuals' stories and histories – grant each character a space in which to speak, enacting fictionally precisely the aims of oral history and collective memory

18 Smyth et al., 270–1.

19 Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depicts the adventures of a teenaged Huckleberry ("Huck") Finn and Jim, an enslaved person, who travel the Mississippi River in search of freedom from "sivilization" and slavery, respectively; Faulkner's Nobel Prize–winning fiction traces the transition of the US South from a plantation-based slave society to a mercantile economy ensconced in a context of racial apartheid.

work: the social and communal quality of personal, psychological experience and reality. Moreover, her attention to place allocates critical attention to women: in her fiction, Smith privileges space that privileges women. In this way, therefore, Smith's fictional corpus offers us a frame through which to examine oral history. Moreover, her fiction provides a lens into the intersections of place, memory and modernity – especially what counts as modernity in the Anthropocene. Through her focus on the alteration and reinscription of place and environment in *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985) and *Saving Grace* (1995), Smith explores how changes in place provoke and redirect changes in memory, both personal and collective.[20] Fiction, especially Smith's, plays a critical role in the formation, articulation and reconceptualisation of collective memory rooted in place. For the purposes of this essay, Smith's work makes good on Karen E. Till's admonition that memory studies scholars 'have much to gain by paying attention to works by artists … and activists who also acknowledge the way that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds' and 'involve themselves with artistic and activist place-based memory *practice*'. Thus I join Till in a 'memory studies agenda that remains sensitive to the ways individuals and groups understand their pasts and possible futures through the relationships they and others have with place' – with the added burden that Grundy, its memorialisation in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, and the Appalachians as the setting of Smith's most acclaimed fiction serve as an exemplary locus for what climate change might look like for millions of people who inhabit re-engineered places or are displaced forever from places that no longer exist.[21]

PLACE AND MEMORY IN LITERATURE: LEE SMITH'S *ORAL HISTORY*, *FAMILY LINEN* AND *SAVING GRACE*

As *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* and Smith's novels *Oral History*, *Family Linen* and *Saving Grace* show, memory is yoked to place. Place – the physical structures and locations accessed through sight, movement and touch, stored in the mind as

20 Lee Smith, *Family Linen* (New York: Putnam, 1985), *Oral History* (New York: Putnam, 1983) and *Saving Grace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

21 Karen E. Till, 'Artistic and Activist Memory-work: Approaching Place-Based Practice', *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 101.

the settings in, on and through which formative life experiences occur – provides a foundation, a touchstone, for memory. Place provides a setting for the social interaction that creates and sustains memory; it makes memory 'collective' in that it makes social and relational memory and its encoding, the process by which a mental representation is formed in memory. It signifies certain aspects of memory and history, and thus it becomes and serves as a medium on which memory is debated and contested. Fiction and oral history are compatible, symbiotic and mutually inclusive: both perform as documents of collective memory, with one exposing or completing the gaps of the other and vice versa. The challenge to memorialise place that these disparate texts confront shapes the narratives they tell and problematises the future spaces they imagine.

Figure 3 Author Lee Smith [n.d.]. Available at https://www.lee-smith.com/images/lee20202.jpg.

Smith is a leading figure in US literature, in particular US Southern literature. She is the author of 17 novels and collections of short stories, contributor to or editor of three works concerned with the Appalachian Mountains and experiences of women, and a memoirist. Compared to Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, Smith is recognised for her generous and empathetic rendering of Appalachian culture, refusal to stereotype, and investment in the full (even if messy) humanity of her characters. This essay focuses on three novels of Smith's for their interweaving of memory and place. *Oral History* tells the story of the Cantrell family of western Virginia through various characters' perspectives as captured by a college student completing an oral history assignment. *Family Linen*, also set in western Virginia, narrates the unravelling of a buried family secret after repressed memories are surfaced during hypnosis. Finally, *Saving Grace*, set in the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains, focuses on a woman who escapes her fundamentalist family and strikes out on her own, without ever freeing herself from the pull of memory and the past. In this essay, I focus on the intersection of memory and place at the core of each novel. Indeed, in the relocation of the Dutys' store in *Saving Grace*, the

construction of the theme park Ghostland in *Oral History*, and the construction of a swimming pool in *Family Linen*, the civil engineering that relocates the town of Grundy has, in Smith's fiction, imagined antecedents.

Each instance hinges on the role of memory before and after the alteration of physical space. *Saving Grace* positions a Food Lion grocery store as a bastard interloper. Florida Grace Shepherd, the novel's protagonist, wanders, is lost, and in the end is found – but with the significant change that the home that she remembers is no longer literally, physically there. Where her father's church, annual revival and neighbours' store were originally located is now a modern supermarket. *Oral History* concludes with the devastation of a mountain valley for the construction of an amusement park. The novel, which fixates on recording and archiving (in writing) the folkways, dialects, stories and sociologies of a region, ends with the decimation via commercialisation of the very ground on which those epistemologies are founded and rooted. Similarly, the construction of a swimming pool in *Family Linen* simultaneously constructs yet destroys 'memory': the characters must accept a memory they would rather forget, the memory of their father by their mother. Like *Oral History*, *Family Linen* operates by illustrating the ways individuals must come to terms with collective histories, memories and genealogies.

More than any other character in the novels discussed here, Florida Grace Shepherd epitomises the uneasy, unsettling confrontation with memory. The novel – a sort of bildungsroman that traces Grace's life from youth through two marriages and divorces – ingests and interiorises the constant commerce with memory of place:

> But I was still not prepared for the sight that met my eyes when I came around the bend. There sat a huge Food Lion supermarket, right where the Dutys' grocery used to be. An enormous paved parking lot full of cars completely covered the place where we'd held the Homecoming, the place where I'd had my vision, the place where Daddy's church had stood.[22]

22 Lee Smith, *Saving Grace*, 254.

Much like the interviewees in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, Grace yokes memory to place: the site of the new, modern grocery is the same site as crucial moments in her history and memory. On grounds now paved over, Grace once had prophesied that the church would suffer; a serpent subsequently bit Ruth Duty. Grace perceives the parking lot as paving over, covering and hiding that which she remembered; thus she risks losing memories, as they are buried and hidden. Moreover, the erasure of the Dutys' community grocery symbolises the erasure of community: rather than creating and sustaining memory in tales and stories told, retold and reformatted around the counter in a small-town market, there now exists only a big-box, impersonal supermarket. Belief in the divine has been replaced by belief in mammon: the cars metonymise the people who now shop instead of worship and speak in tongues. Big box retail, that is, has supplanted the church.

For Grace, the alteration to memory – and the need to make new memory – is too much for simple faith.

> I couldn't believe it. I pulled into a parking space to get a better look. Clearly this was a brand-new Food Lion, very modern, with drive-thru pick-up and everything. It was open and doing great business. People streamed out of the automatic doors, their carts piled high with paper Food Lion bags. Kids ran all around. Violet arc lights shone over the parking lot where – four spaces over – a long-haired teenage boy and a girl were back up against a truck, kissing like crazy. Their legs were pressed tight together. I sat there in my car for almost fifteen minutes and watched the crowd without seeing a soul I knew. I couldn't take it all in.[23]

That Grace cannot believe change symbolises the disjunction between memory and rationality, for she must begin to re-remember her past and reconcile it with the reconstructed space in which she now sits. She pulls into the parking lot 'to get a better look': for it to become lodged in her memory, she must commit it to visual memory. It becomes too much: she cannot 'take it all in', because the change is too

23 Smith, *Saving Grace*, 254.

great. In many ways, the unresolved ending of the novel points to the failure of memory to survive radical environmental and geographical relocation. Grace does not fit in this world anymore; her memories cannot sustain and surmount the radical alteration of her surroundings. The novel's irresolution mirrors this disjunction and ostracism: the novel has no definitive ending, gesturing only toward Grace's rejection of the world she thought she knew and to which she returned, in favour of some as yet unstated and undefined place.

Oral History epitomises yet problematises the very practice its title interpellates. The story of a college student who takes a tape recorder deep into the mountains of southwest Virginia in order to record her family's stories for a class requirement, the novel uses the construct of oral history to trace the various relations of the Cantrells over several generations. Smith reconstructs the topographical and temporal spaces of the novel to give voice to strong women characters; in Dorothy Combs Hill's words, she 'create[s] an altered world that unleashes the female imagination from its bonds, psychic and societal, and out of those fertile waters arise the red and the golden goddesses'.[24] But the novel's epilogue seems to undermine those very spaces, as Almarine Wade (named after the charismatic patriarch of the family) destroys the mountains to build

> Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (campground, motel, Olympic-sized pool, waterslide, and gift shop) in Hoot Owl Holler. Ghostland, designed by a Nashville architect, will be the prettiest theme park east of Opryland itself, its rides and amusements terraced up and down the steep holler, its skylift zooming up and down from the burial ground where the cafeteria is. And the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of Ghostland, untouched. Vines grow up through the porch where the rocking chair sits, and the south wall of the house has fallen in. It's surrounded by a chain link fence, fronted by the observation deck with redwood benches which fill up every summer night with those who have paid the extra $4.50 to be here, to sit in this cool misty hush while the

24 Dorothy Combs Hill, *Lee Smith* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 80.

> shadows lengthen from the three mountains – Hoot Owl, Snowman, and Hurricane – while the night settles in, to be here when the dark comes and the wind and the laughter start, to see it with their own eyes when that rocking chair starts rocking and rocks like crazy the whole night long.[25]

While a natural phenomenon spurs the destruction of the 'old' Grundy in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, mercenary concerns effect the destruction of the mountains in *Oral History*. Ghostland seems to conflate Opryland – the (now defunct, replaced by an outlet mall) country-music-based theme park in Nashville – and Dollywood, the highly successful (and still expanding) amusement park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, owned and operated by Dolly Parton. Ghostland tramples on the very structures hallowed and sanctified by the novel: the burial ground, home and front porch. It turns those signifiers of heritage into moneymaking ventures, charging an extra $4.50 a person to see and hear the ghosts that inhabit the old homeplace. But subverting this undermining of the old and sacred is the suggestion that nature is reclaiming what humankind has usurped – where the south wall of the old house has collapsed, vines are beginning to recuperate the space.

Thus Ghostland represents the commercialisation and commodification of memory: Al's enterprise succeeds because it offers its paying visitors a chance to relive the past. Much as Dollywood reels in visitors because of its 'authentic' yet domesticated mountain culture, Ghostland packages the past into a product with mass appeal. Indeed, it reflects the effect of oral history itself: it allows the dilettante to imbibe another time and place without dirtying their hands or clothes, simultaneously replicating yet creating memory. The memory it replicates is a stereotype of 'mountain' culture; the memory it creates is the shadow in the Platonic cave.

In *Family Linen*, the discovery of a body during the construction of a swimming pool functions as both a confirmation and complication of memory. It confirms memory in that the discovery of Jewell Rife's body proves Sybill Hess correct. She is undergoing hypnosis because of a repressed memory in which she saw the mutilation of Jewell's

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25 Lee Smith, *Oral History*, 285–6 (original in italics).

body, and she believes that her mother is the murderer. But the body's discovery complicates the accuracy and precision of memory in that it is not her mother, but her mother's sister, who has killed him. Nonetheless, the physical evidence of the body – hidden in the earth and revealed only in its alteration – serves as a decoy to the operation of memory. Moreover, the physical presence of the pool functions as a perpetual site of memory and the instability of meaning. Though the close of the novel attempts to reconcile the swimming pool to the people whose memories it refracts and unites, baptising them in its water – 'Tomorrow nobody will remember exactly who was the first one in the pool, but soon it's full of churning bodies, pale flashing flesh beneath the water'[26] – the pool remains an unsettling space, a space that hopes to purify a family's collective memory while keeping them from fully coming to terms with it.

Like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, these novels formulate a response to radical change. To be sure, that response is anything but 'easy' or 'simple' – rather, memory is contested, constructed and reconstructed. In *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, for example, interviewees debate the wisdom of the massive relocation plan, while in her novels Smith constructs and reconstructs a memory that makes space for strong women and women's lives. Perhaps more so than *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* – an oral history of a tiny mountain hamlet, published by a small North Carolina press to limited release – Smith's novels disseminate Appalachian culture, folkways and memory, informing the collective memory of those both inside and outside the Appalachians. First, Smith's stature as a renowned writer allows her the legitimacy and the authority to transform an oral history project focused on an ordinary, geographically isolated community into an extraordinary record of a compelling place. Second, Smith's efforts corroborate the validity of works of fiction as legitimate artefacts in creating a culture's larger collective memory of its significant places. Reading oral history and collective memory in tandem with fiction (and vice versa) is a rich, rewarding experience, as one informs the other in illuminating and thought-provoking ways.

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26 Lee Smith, *Family Linen*, 272.

CONCLUSION

Each of these novels aims to memorialise a 'place', be it a coalmining town in economic decline, the Cantrell homeplace in Hoot Owl Holler, the Scrabble Creek of Florida Grace Shepherd's youth, or the backyard of a family matriarch. Inadequate though they might seem, they seek to articulate for all posterity a geography and topography. As Smith's fiction reveals, the process of memory- and place-making is one of confrontation and conflict. Smith's commitment to creating *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* thus seeks a compromise: it aims to preserve collective memory at the same time that it invents and forges a new, textually consolidated and sanctioned collective memory. Throughout, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* makes good on preserving the public spaces of the community: the general store, the courthouse, the theatre and the main street, historicised by the Levisa Fork's extreme floods; at the same time, the stories of human lives it contains are both mundane and extraordinary. Its narratives endow dignity to lives lived in place, where personal and communal history coalesce; they celebrate the tendons that link personal narratives to the narratives of neighbours, family and friends, whose worldview, whose own personal relationship to these share spaces, understands and validates the significance of these stories. In the words of James Swiney, 'The mountain people are a spectacular people'.[27]

Yet perhaps most important, these stories elicit and foster a collective consciousness for the new places of the future. High school teacher Raines writes that

> over the course of the project, I have come to realize that oral history … is vitally important for the youth of our postmodern culture … it gives students a sense of identity … bridges the generational gap [and] … gives students

27 Eduardo Porter, 'Can a Coal Town Reinvent Itself?', *The New York Times*, 6 December 2019, accessed 15 November 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/business/economy/coal-future-virginia.html; Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 55, 140, 165. For further discussion of memory in Smith's fiction, see William Teem, 'Memory as New Beginning in Smith's *News of the Spirit*'; Debra Druesedow, 'Place and Memory in Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*'; and Tanya Long Bennett, '"It Was Like I Was Right There": Primary Experience and the Role of Memory in Lee Smith's *The Devil's Dream*', articles in a special issue of *Pembroke Magazine*, vol. 33 (2001).

> their own rich legacies … When Lee and I first discussed this project two years ago, I never dreamed how deeply these young people would be affected.

As student Nathan Endicott prefaces one man's oral history, 'As we left, I realized that there actually were some interesting people in Grundy!'[28] Interviewees such as Gaynell Fowler look to the future without nostalgia: 'The old buildings are rotting. They're rat infested. They need to be torn down. They are fire hazards … It's just the fact that it's not going to be like it used to be, and everybody misses that. It's a mental thing'. A 'mental thing' indeed, as the vision she expresses privileges the creation of a new place. Whatever that new place is and becomes, oral history as well as fiction illuminates and extends the other, as Smith's acclaimed novels and *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* underscore. Oral history illustrates the communal and social value of the process of telling stories about places that were, while stories and novels permit the writer to shed further light on cultural, social and geographical spaces and help make sense of the places that will be and the human communities who inhabit them.

28 Debbie Raines, 'Preface', in Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, x–xi; Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 33.