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Suzanne W. Jones

University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

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City Folks in Hoot Owl Holler: Narrative Strategy in Lee Smith's *Oral History*

by Suzanne W. Jones

Over the years American writers have perceived Appalachia differently depending on how America has perceived itself. While those who have approved of the American way of life have looked down on mountain life, those who have disapproved have seen Appalachia as an alternative culture from which America might take a lesson (*Appalachia*, 65). In 1873 the journalist William Harney and the editors of *Lippincott Magazine* “discovered” Appalachia, and historian Henry Shapiro argues that since then America has thought of this mountainous portion of eight southern states as a discrete region, “in but not of America” (*Appalachia*, 4). In the 1870’s writers caught up in what they saw as America’s progress saw Appalachia as behind the times. For vacationers and local-color writers, who looked with wonder at colorful people, quaint customs, and picturesque scenes, Appalachia was a measure of how far America had come. At the turn of the century when writers of “uplift literature” accompanied the missionaries and teachers to the region, America’s success became a measure of how far Appalachia had to go. These outsiders viewed Appalachians as ignorant, isolated hillbillies, poor, shiftless, and easily provoked.¹

¹In this paragraph and the one following, I am summarizing Shapiro’s argument in *Appalachia on Our Mind* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

World War I, however, and the depression that followed not only changed America's view of itself but altered its perception of Appalachia. For the first time America saw Appalachia not as unAmerican but as more nearly American—conserving old English folk culture and preserving American pioneer individualism. The mountaineer's way of life seemed to be the very heritage the war was fought to safeguard but a heritage that was slipping away. These outsiders viewed Appalachians as sturdy, independent folk, who enjoyed a noble life.

In her recent novel *Oral History* Lee Smith uses the perspectives of two outsiders, upper class Richard Burlage from Richmond and middle class Jennifer Bingham from Abingdon, to examine the causes and consequences of typical twentieth-century perceptions of Appalachia. Smith, who grew up in southwestern Virginia, is adept at revealing the naivete and the condescension that often characterize the outsider's perception of mountain people. She relates the Cantrell family legend through the tales of four generations of friends and enemies, insiders and outsiders, to Hoot Owl Holler. The multiple perspectives Smith uses indicate that she is just as interested in the varying perceptions of Appalachia as she is in the actual place and its people.

Smith frames her novel in the present when Jennifer Bingham returns to her dead mother's home in Hoot Owl Holler to collect oral history for a class project. Taught by her upwardly mobile father and stepmother to look down on her real mother's family, Jennifer now sees her relatives from another perspective—that of her "Yankee" folklore professor who finds Jennifer's tales of the haunted Cantrell homeplace and Hoot Owl Holler lore fascinating material. Through Jennifer, Smith satirizes amateur folklorists—the latest breed of curiosity seekers in Appalachia. Although their collection of oral history and analysis of mountain culture is supposed to be objective, Smith suggests otherwise. While Jennifer, like some amateur folklorists, tries to prove that a pastoral past still lives in the present, Smith is at pains to paint a more complex picture, making sure that for every cotton quilt there is an aluminum lawn chair and for every log cabin there is a custom painted van.

The first mountain character we meet, however, is a folklorist's dream come true; Jennifer calls him a "real treasure" (11). Little Luther Wade, dressed in western shirt and cowboy boots, sits on the porch strumming his dulcimer while his wife Ora Mae makes an afghan in the star pattern. But when the rest of the family arrives on the scene, any reader who like Jennifer had hopes of an Appalachian time warp is pulled back into the present. For along with the rest of America, the people of Hoot Owl Holler learn their

culture from the television and their manners from the movies. Debra, who has styled her blonde hair "like a movie star" (2), wears tight pink knit slacks and a black T-shirt with "Foxy Lady" written in silver glitter. Her husband Al, a man who has "never been one to stand in the way of progress" (3) sells AmWay and belongs to the Lions Club and Junior Toastmasters. While he puts orange shag carpet in his van, his daughter, Suzy Q, plays with her Charlie's Angel doll and his two sons watch "Magnum."

In the meantime Jennifer, who is further up the mountain putting a tape recorder in the old Cantrell homeplace, hopes to capture the banging noises and ghostly laughter that have driven her grandparents, Little Luther and Ora Mae, to live at their son Al's house down below. Much like the local colorists a century before, Jennifer coos over mountain quaintness:

. . . it is just beautiful in this holler, so peaceful, like being in a time machine. She can't understand why her father never would let her come here when it is so plainly wonderful, when it was her real mother's home after all. . . . And these people are so sweet, so simple, so kind (4).

Smith positions Jennifer high above the family in order to call in question the judgments she makes. From her lofty vantage point, Jennifer writes her "Impressions" in a notebook that is filled with romantic notions and clichéd rhetoric, consciously chosen to please her folklore professor. She writes of "the picturesque old homeplace . . . so high above the lush quiltlike valley with its gaily roaring creek" (6). But her preconceptions alter her perception. She sees in the mountain people exactly what her professor has encouraged her to see, and she collects information that she knows will impress him because she has a crush on him.

Even direct contact with her mountain family does not correct Jennifer's naive, stereotyped view. To adjust for complexity, she simply omits from her report what does not fit her expectations. Though startled at the sight of little Suzy Q's silver phosphorescent fingernails, Jennifer does not take notes on this phenomenon. Instead she writes of her grandfather because with his dulcimer and folk songs he is the sort of person one would expect to find in Hoot Owl Holler. Her sullen grandmother is a different story. Feeling that Ora Mae, though hardworking, is "not as friendly as someone might have supposed" (10), Jennifer still finds a way of pushing her into the mold. She plans to write something about "the extended family" (10) in her notebook and so tells Ora Mae:

I think it's just wonderful the way all of you still live right here in the valley and help each other out. . . . It's remarkable. Not many

people live that way any more (10).

The oral history that follows, the mountain voices that take over, provide a corrective to Jennifer's romantic notions for the reader if not for her. What Jennifer does not know and is unable to find out simply because of her own biases is that Ora Mae has not always been so helpful. Jealous of her beautiful stepsister Dory, Ora Mae failed to give her a letter from her Richmond lover, Richard Burlage, which would have taken Dory out of Hoot Owl Holler. Thus Ora Mae changes the course of both their lives, and Jennifer's as well, because they are Jennifer's grandparents. Ora Mae's story and the ones that follow reveal both brutality and love, betrayal and loyalty, thereby suggesting that the mountain people are not always so kind, so simple, or so sweet as Jennifer would have them be.

Through Jennifer, Smith suggests an academic exploitation of the hills which, though different from that of the loggers, miners, and mill owners who invaded Appalachia earlier in this century, is still abusive. Like these outsiders, Jennifer is out for her own gain, even though unlike most of them, she is unaware of her own motives. Jennifer collects her oral history and gets an A and a husband because of it. But the material she has collected is inaccurate; it is what social scientist Allen Batteau has called "a museum piece, preserved for the entertainment of the elite" (164). Jennifer fails as a folklorist on two counts. First, she is not objective in her study. Because she tries to compose the present to look like the past, she misses the full array of life—from the significance of Suzy Q's fingernails to an understanding of what Debra and Al are really doing in the van after supper. Only when Little Luther is playing the dulcimer, Debra is clogging, and Al is singing "Wildwood Flower" does Jennifer feel she has gotten what she has come for: "it is all so fine, it is just like Jennifer hopes it would be, until Ora Mae stands up all of a sudden and ruins it" (12). Second, Jennifer fails as a folklorist because she is naive in her understanding of how storytelling functions in the mountains. She 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 the transmission of events—something Smith's multiple narration does permit her readers to see.

As we experience the telling and retelling of the Cantrell family story, we realize that each story is colored by the personal interest of the teller. For example, Granny Younger, born storyteller and purveyor of local lore, makes us believe that Almarine Cantrell fell in love with a beautiful witch, "Red Emmy." Crazy Rose Hobbitts adds a new twist. Because of her own unrequited love for Almarine, she makes him out to be a bewitched man,

accusing him of killing his wife Emmy and bringing a curse onto the family. Though she vengefully invents this last “fact,” others pass it on.

The following exchange between Justine Poole and her lover Reverend Aldous Rife reflects not only how stories are transmitted but also how they are perceived:

“I do think there’s a curse on the Cantrells, though,” she (Justine) says. “. . . Like you take Almarine, shot to death, and you take them three sons of hisn, scattered off God knows where. And you go back and take that crazy girl, and he kilt her—”

“We don’t know that,” Aldous says.

“Well, we just as well as know it,” Justine says. “And then that first young wife he had, the one with the gypsy blood. . . .”

“She wasn’t a gypsy,” Aldous says. “Her name was Pricey Jane.”

“Well, *whatever!* Anyway, where is she now, answer me that, and her little son dead with her, not to mention Paris Blankenship or that sick little girl they’ve got up there right now or what Ludie Davenport saw on the trace. . . .”

“Ludie Davenport is a still-healthy woman saddled with a sick husband,” Aldous answers her finally, dragging his mind back up from a place near sleep. “Maybe she needs some excitement.”

“Excitement, my hind foot!” Justine says.

“Look. Justine. You could make up something about anybody up in any of those hollers, and you know it. Take the Skeens, and that fire they had last Christmas and three of the children burned up, or the way Mavis Rife had two babies to die in a row. . . . Or any number of other people. Take Rhoda Hibbitt’s daughter Rose, for instance.”

“Well, Rose is just touched in the head,” Justine says reasonably. “Everybody knows *that*.”

“I know it,” Aldous says. “Everybody knows it, you’re right. But somebody could have started up a tale about her—this is the point—only she started up a tale about Almarine instead. And once it starts, it just goes on by itself, it takes on a life of its own no matter who may be hurt in the process” (186-87).

In explaining how legends are formed, Aldous Rife explains the narrative process Smith employs in *Oral History*. Through the novel we see that when a belief, like Red Emmy being a witch, intersects with a portentous event in real life, such as the death of Almarine’s second wife, Pricey Jane, the event may be interpreted and narrated to others as supernatural (Brunvand, 119).

Smith shows us that repeated transmission of the tale supports the belief and produces a legend that may make its way into family history.

All of these complexities escape amateur folklorist Jennifer. When she leaves, she says "it's been real nice getting to know all of you" (289), but she has not really gotten to know any of them. And through the narration of *Oral History*, Smith makes it obvious that one must know the teller of tales as well as the listener in order to understand the tale-telling. Jennifer, however, barrages her long-lost mountain family with questions before she has even gotten to know them or they her. Their reactions to her demands for folk lore vary from performing on cue—her grandfather is always ready to strum a tune on his dulcimer. To withdrawal—her grandmother becomes silent and tells her not to come back again. To anger—her Uncle Al roughly kisses Jennifer when she leaves, sticking his tongue in her mouth. Folklorist Barre Toelken explains such reactions this way:

When we analyze or study those expressions that are deep aspects of other peoples' cultural involvement, we run the risk of offending them by bringing those intellectual considerations into focus as if they were more important than the real functioning of the folklore in its habitat. People often become angry when their cultural involvement is held up for intellectual scrutiny (265).

But Jennifer is unaware both of her callousness and of her relatives' emotional involvement in their family history. After prying their tales from them, she cannot understand later why Little Luther is crying or why Ora Mae tells her not to come back again or why her Uncle Al rudely kisses her. Jennifer does not understand that the family history is not picturesque and quaint to those who live it, but sad and horrifying and in some cases embarrassing. Jennifer dredges up a past of haunted houses, cursed family members, passionate loves, and cruel deaths that the present generation is trying to put behind them.

Nor is Jennifer aware of her condescension. She offends Al by objectifying him and classifying his family as different. Jennifer's polite manners do not really cover up the fact that she has related to her relatives in terms of how well they fit her assignment. Al, who is proud of his own progress, resents Jennifer's patronizing manner. To avenge his hurt pride and assuage growing feelings of inferiority, he begins to tell her the true story of how her mother died. Although Jennifer asks for the facts, she feels better when he stops his revelations and mends his manners, telling her "drive careful now, you hear?" (290). The complex, unromantic truth of her mother's death will disturb Jennifer's simple fiction about pneumonia. Jennifer's mother, un-

happy with the placid bourgeois life her husband had provided, died from the birth of a child conceived in an affair with one of her high school art students.

In order to make sense of Al's bitterness, Jennifer takes her romanticized view about the mountain people being sweet and simple and kind and changes "it all around in her head" (290) on her way back to college. Unaware of her part in provoking Al's shocking response, she falls back on another familiar stereotype of mountain people to explain his behavior:

Al is nothing but a big old bully, a joker after all. They still live close to the land, all of them. Some things may seem modern, like the van, but they're not, not really. They are really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts (290-91).

Through Jennifer's reactions to her Uncle Al's rude advances at the end of the novel, Smith cautions her readers against flipping to "the other side of the pastoral coin" (291), focusing too narrowly on another set of facts about mountain people without understanding the origins of their behavior. The oral history contained within the frame of Jennifer's clichéd sophomoric prose not only proves both views, the romantic and the primitive, to be simplistic but goes a long way toward explaining motivations for behavior that outsiders might deem peculiar.

It is indeed ironic that the stories Jennifer could have heard if she had opened herself up to the people (the stories we readers do hear) not only would have complicated her simplistic view but would have taught her about the dangers of preconceptions. For like her real grandfather Richard Burlage, a man whose existence she is unaware of, Jennifer came to Hoot Owl Holler with ideas of Appalachia that prevented her from seeing the place, its people, or herself clearly.

Smith gives us Richard's story through his journal. His analytical prose, littered with abstractions and literary allusions, provides a striking contrast to the expressive and colorfully distinctive mountain voices that precede his in the narrative. Having grown up in Richmond surrounded, as he sees it, by the dead past of a decadent southern aristocracy, his life is bereft of meaning, belief, and perhaps most importantly Melissa, the finishing school graduate who has thrown him over. Richard looks to Appalachia as an exotic place to recoup his losses: "There is an inescapable appeal, I find in the very strangeness, the very inaccessibility" (105). Thus Richard thinks of the journey to Hoot Owl Holler not as just "a simple geographical pilgrimage" "but also a pilgrimage back through time, a pilgrimage to a simple era, back—dare I hope it—to the very roots of consciousness and belief" (93).

Richard has a pastoral vision of mountain life—a typical urban fantasy of rural bliss. And Smith warns her readers of the inadequacy of his vision the minute he arrives in the hills to assume his teaching position. Riding into Black Rock in a pickup truck, Richard fantasizes about the girl in the back whose face he cannot see. Her warm, curly brown hair prompts him to give her all of Melissa's most attractive attributes and none of her flaws. He projects his fantasy onto her, just as he will project his fantasies onto the town. Black Rock looks he says, "like a town of fifty years ago, an idealized kind of town. A person could live here certainly. . . . I imagined box suppers, bingo games, hoedowns, the hearty jolly peasantry of these hills" (108). He finds instead food he cannot eat and a people wary of "foreigners." After spending one miserable night in a one-bedroom cabin with the entire Justice family, Richard retreats to a corner of his schoolroom, deciding not to uphold the schoolmaster's tradition of living with local people. It is significant that Richard makes this move so that he can "keep in mind the rather lofty ideals and desires which brought him here in the first place" (112). Proximity to reality is not conducive to maintaining romantic illusions.

Despite his lofty and rather condescending ideals, which include bringing enlightenment to the "hinterlands" (119), Richard is out to serve himself as well. When the beautiful Dory Cantrell appears on the scene, he forgoes his ideals and his plans for a Christmas program for the children and he leaves in the middle of a revival meeting, where his own salvation is at issue. For Richard is worried primarily about his inability to experience life first hand, a malady brought on by an acute self-consciousness that Smith links with both World War I angst and mannered southern gentility. Richard sees Appalachia as the Virginian's alternative to the conventional deserted island, a place where human passion can be seen unclothed and unfettered by the constraints of society and history. Richard's journal with its stuffy, self-conscious diction (his writing is peppered with remarks like "I like that phrase" 119) betrays his tendency to think about feeling rather than to feel. But his relationship with Dory Cantrell, the sister of one of his students, brings feeling into both his life and his writing. With Dory's example of how to openly express emotions, Richard experiences passionate love, a feeling of ease with himself, and a oneness with Dory.

But Dory's love is only one side of the expressiveness of mountain culture. Smith underlines the problem in Richard's perception by repeatedly having him fail to see Dory's face clearly. The day he visits her mountain home, he cannot always "see her face" (127), and the first time they make love he cannot "see" her either (155). He romanticizes her oneness with nature,

never seeing it as the natural outgrowth of a life lived close to the land. Imagining “the high solitude of Hoot Owl Holler and the clean purity of Dory’s barren life” (121), he cannot conceive of her work-filled days or her sexual experience. It is significant that Richard likes to think of Dory in terms of Christopher Marlow’s pastoral vision in “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” which Richard copies into his journal:

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hill, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields (121).

Richard’s experiences, however, expose the simplicity of this view.

The mountains yield violence as well as romance, but Richard avoids talking to Dory about her family’s moonshine business or her father’s murder or her brothers’ vendetta against the man who murdered him. For a while, blinded by his pastoral vision, Richard chooses not to see that in an expressive culture, the people will be just as open with their hate as with their love. Smith has her readers experience Richard’s naivete by withholding the information that Richard’s pastoral woods hide an angry suitor to Dory, who has no qualms about killing an interloper. Smith juxtaposes the last entry in Richard’s journal, transcribed the day he left the mountains, with Little Luther’s angry rambling about killing Richard, whom he perceives as a rival for Dory’s love.

Although Ora Mae’s failure to deliver Richard’s note to Dory causes him to lose her, Richard’s idealistic perspective prevents him from understanding either Dory or her mountain culture. Hearing that Dory’s father is manufacturing moonshine, Richard judges him harshly: “a criminal then . . . a common criminal, and to involve his own family in these activities” (131). Aldous Rife hauls Richard up short:

I wouldn’t be so fast to judge, young fellow, if I was you. . . . Now you’ve been up that holler, and you’ve seen how many folks Almarine Cantrell has got to feed. And you seen the land up there, and the hardships (131).

But Richard has not really seen the hardships; he has been blinded by his vision of Dory.

Ten years later when Richard returns during the Depression as a professional photographer, he is surprised to see how the lumber companies have stripped the timber from the holler. Then he recalls the logs floating in the river when he was there before, and he remembers how he had thought

nothing of them, a realization which causes him to wonder what else he might have missed, "what else might have made no impression" (230).

Of course what he has missed is made clear to the reader through the oral history that precedes his second series of journal entries. He has injured Dory unwittingly. For while Richard goes back to Richmond, marries a bishop's daughter, and continues to praise himself for his "sensitivity," Dory bears him twin daughters of whose existence he is never aware. In resignation she marries Little Luther Wade, but continues to haunt the railroad tracks that took Richard from her. Finally she commits suicide by laying her head down on the tracks before an oncoming train. Richard, who like his granddaughter Jennifer, sees Dory and his mountain experience chiefly as the means of his own self-discovery ("the nativity of me!" (159) he calls it), never once considers the effect he has had on Dory.

Richard, the man who had intended to serve Appalachia, makes it the subject of his art when he returns. Once again Appalachia serves him. It is indeed ironic that an impoverished miner, who sees Richard's camera, assumes he is with the WPA and therefore suggests ways the government could aid the mountaineers. When the frustrated miner shoots out the mirror of Richard's shiny new car, Richard, like Jennifer in her episode with Almarine, cannot understand the man's rage. Smith, in choosing "shoot" as the verb to describe Richard's picture taking, links Richard with the miner in their acts of violence. With Richard, Smith suggests that the artist can exploit a land and its people just as surely as those who purchase the mineral rights. For unlike photographers, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, whose photography commissioned by the government helped poor people during the Depression, Richard is not motivated by his social conscience but by his aesthetic sense. He thinks only of the composition of his photographs rather than of their content. The begging boys with holes in their shoes are "picturesque"; his new car which they stand beside provides the perfect "incongruous, ironic juxtaposition" (232). The content of his photographs only further suggests his blurred vision of mountain life. The pictures he surreptitiously takes of Dory do not turn out.

At this point in the novel, Smith links Richard with Jennifer through their lofty vantage points on the holler and their way of objectifying its people. Both Richard and Jennifer seek to find themselves in Appalachia, but because they do not allow the people there to be themselves, they cannot experience either self-discovery or true communion with the Appalachians.

At the heart of regional literature is a presentation of a different mode of life, a conflict between insiders and outsiders, and a narrative strategy that posits "we," the readers, against "them," those read about. Yet in *Oral*

History the lines are not so clearly drawn. For just as soon as Smith aligns her readers with the mountain folk against the city folk, she changes our perspective, refusing to allow us to romanticize the mountain people, and makes us see that these expressive folk could benefit from a little civilized restraint. Ironically it is Richard's aesthetic sense and abstract ideas, which we see as the root of his problem, that provide Dory's adolescent brother Jink with a more sensitive model of manhood than that he has learned from his kinfolk. After Richard leaves the hollow, Jink bemoans his departure as the loss of an alternative way of life. Soon Jink falls to imitating the violent ways of the men around him.

By the end of the novel, it is not only the outsiders—the loggers and miners and amateur folklorists and artists—who violate the mountains and the people. The mountain people themselves prove no more resistant to the lure of excessive and self-serving profit than do the outsiders. As the novel concludes, we learn that Almarine Cantrell is making plans for a theme park in Hoot Owl Holler to be called Ghostland, complete with campground, motel, Olympic-size pool, waterslide and gift shop, rides and amusements, a “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” (292). The complexity of Lee Smith's vision then cannot be categorized into simple dichotomies of insider and outsider, or country and city.

For Lee Smith's interest in perception and vantage points goes far beyond her concern with city folk in the holler. From her oral history we learn that the Hoot Owl Holler inhabitants are plagued with romantic notions too. And their yearnings fix themselves on the flatlands just as the flatlanders' longings often turn toward the mountains. To both, the other place takes on symbolic significance. It becomes the source of what their place does not offer. Instead of accepting the holler's view of her family as bewitched, Sally Wade, Dory Cantrell's daughter and Jennifer's aunt, defines the family problem as being “all eat up with wanting something they haven't got” (239). For her the family history starts with her grandfather Almarine Cantrell, who spent years as a boy “staring out beyond them hills” (21). It ends with Pearl (Richard and Dory's daughter and Jennifer's mother) who did her best as she says, “to get away, to have a new life” (270). Through Sally, Lee Smith suggests that problems arise from romanticizing a place because it is different.

At the same time that Lee Smith's narrative perspective in *Oral History* reveals the dangers of categorizing people by where they live,² she celebrates the distinctiveness of place. Through the cliched language of her city folks,

she steers her readers away from naive, romanticized notions of Appalachia. Through her distinctive mountain voices, she prevents her readers from converting Appalachia into what they expect it to be, and she lets it be what it is. The novel *Oral History* reveals Lee Smith's sense that a place is not simply a repository of picturesque scenery and quaint customs but a storehouse of emotions and memories.³ For readers, Smith's Hoot Owl Holler resonates with meaning that it does not have for the outsiders in the novel. For us, Wall Johnson's is not merely a general store where Richard buys groceries, but the place where Almarine Cantrell played cards on the night his wife Pricey Jane was taken sick. And the glass beads Jennifer finds on the mountain and then discards are a reminder of Parrot's funny and fruitless courtship of Ora Mae. And when Richard photographs the beautiful twins frolicking in the old Dodge car, only we know that they are his own children. For unlike most outsiders to Hoot Owl Holler, readers can see beyond quaint customs and picturesque scenery to the feelings and memories that enliven the landscape. Through the stories Lee Smith recounts so affectionately in the voices of her mountain people, she gives her readers an encounter with Appalachia that forces us to acknowledge our preconceptions, that shows us how storytelling functions in a community, and that makes us understand how a different place may tempt us with the empty promise of fulfillment.

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²See Henry D. Shapiro, "The Place of Culture and the Problem of Identity," *Appalachia and America*, ed. Allen Batteau (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

³See the description of an authentic encounter with a place in David Seamon, "Newcomers, Existential Outsiders and Insiders: Their Portrayal in Two Books by Doris Lessing," *Humanistic Geography and Literature*, ed. Douglas C.D. Pocock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 94.