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**“Endings and Edges”: Narrative Authority in Lee Smith’s *Black Mountain Breakdown***

Senior Paper

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Elizabeth Catte, author of *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018), states that “Appalachians are a group of people burdened with the task of perpetually re-earning our place in narratives” (Catte 127). Catte suggests that external forces ranging from local color writers, extractive industries, photographers, politicians, and reformers have contributed to harmful stereotypes that depict Appalachian people as backwards or rustic. In response to these sentiments, Catte encourages Appalachian people to “tell [their] story” and reclaim the narratives that have been taken from them (Catte 92). Many contemporary Appalachian authors have answered this call for reclamation by using their works to achieve a narrative revisionism that contests the stereotypes and misconceptions about the region and its people.

One such writer seeking to acknowledge the unique and changing voice of Appalachian people through fiction is Lee Smith, an Appalachian author born in Grundy, Virginia in 1944. Smith has written a variety of short stories in addition to fourteen novels, including *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968), *Oral History* (1983), and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), that seek to correct the harmful stereotypes of Appalachian people. Her body of work is often identified as Southern literature and primarily focuses on female narrators who are traditionally overlooked in Appalachian culture. These characters utilize unconventional methods of creativity as a means of navigating and altering their lives. Smith’s novels offer an intimate look into the unique culture of Appalachia from an insider’s perspective. Her fiction often serves to overturn stereotypes by contrasting the setting of the novels, which take place in the century-old mountains of Appalachia, with the modern characters who use their will, intellect, and creativity to navigate their lives.

Lee Smith’s fifth novel *Black Mountain Breakdown* details the life of heroine Crystal Spangler, a dazed beauty queen living in the small town of Black Rock, a fictional coal-mining

town in rural Appalachia. While Crystal has a fairly normal childhood, her life becomes more complicated as she grows into a young woman. Shortly after her father passes away, Crystal is sexually assaulted by her mentally-impaired uncle. As a result, she is unable to recover and her sense of self is permanently altered. Crystal, much like her refractive namesake, suffers from a fractured identity in which she internalizes the interests and expectations of those around her and subsequently changes her behavior to reflect these perceptions. Following the assault, Crystal represses the memory of the event but begins to exhibit a fear of being known intimately by others. As an adult, she tours a sanatorium with her husband and meets a young boy who resembles her uncle. The narrator suggests that Crystal murders the boy because she felt that he knew her. Following this event, Crystal returns to her childhood home in Black Rock where she paralyzes herself and enters a catatonic state. Crystal's narrative is one that is often overlooked in literary criticism of Smith's work due to the stigma surrounding her identity as a survivor with unconventional coping mechanisms.

Despite the increasing prevalence of Appalachian narratives in literature, literary criticism on the topic is limited. With regard to Lee Smith's novels, there is very little criticism written about her earlier works, such as *Black Mountain Breakdown*, in comparison to her later novels. Critics of *Black Mountain Breakdown* often claim that Crystal's capricious behavior and eventual paralysis is indicative of her role as a static character who lacks a distinct narrative as a survivor. Crystal Spangler is often disregarded as a static character despite the changes in behavior her fractured identity causes. Critics claim that this behavior prevents Crystal from progressing from a passive victim who does not acknowledge her trauma to an active survivor who claims her narrative identity. Additionally, these critics often write off Crystal as a

bystander in her own story, contrasting with the heroines of Smith's later novels who are considered catalysts and artists.

In opposition, I posit that Crystal Spangler of *Black Mountain Breakdown* is wrongfully grouped with the "watchers," or more passive characters, who comprise Smith's earlier female characters (MacKethan 4). Crystal Spangler is not a bystander; rather she is an artistic young woman who utilizes her hypersexuality and performative yet capricious behavior as tools to navigate her life. Additionally, this behavior suggests that Crystal, like Smith's later heroines, is an artist in an unconventional sense due to the creative effort and skill required in order for her to perform the many different roles that are expected of her. While Crystal's shifting behavior and performative identity is often regarded as indicating the lack of a solid identity, these aspects of her character serve to demonstrate the presence of a more complex and layered identity that is marked by Crystal's refusal to be pinned down. I believe that Crystal's paralysis, often regarded as a sign of defeat, is a reclamation in the form of an evasive maneuver to avoid being known by others. By entering a willfully catatonic state, Crystal reclaims her narrative authority as an individual and as a survivor she casts off the expectations of others and exists solely for herself, a feat she had never before been able to accomplish.

Crystal's decision to privatize her narrative through her paralysis could be read as an allegory for the ways in which Appalachian narrative strives to depict personal understandings and truths free of stereotypes and expectations from others. The stereotypes regarding Appalachia are pervasive and have determined the ways that Appalachians are viewed by society for centuries. While there is no way of determining when or why these stereotypes developed, there are many writers, reformers, and politicians who can be credited with contributing to these harmful depictions. One such reformer is William Goodell Frost. According to his 1899 piece

“Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” Appalachian people exist in a “Rip Van Winkle sleep” in which they are frozen in the quaintness and antiquity of the pre-industrial past (Frost 311). Frost claims that the physical isolation of Appalachian people resulted in the region being characterized by a “lack of natural means of communication” (311). These sentiments contributed to the widely held belief that Appalachian people were a group incapable of creating and sharing their own narrative, leading local color writers to fill in the blanks. According to author Katie Algeo, in her 2003 article *Locals on Local Color: Imagining Identity in Appalachia*, local color writing is a “style of fiction or travel writing that takes as its starting point a place or region and attempts to convey the essence of that locale through detailed depictions of the geographic setting and through characters that supposedly represent essential qualities of the place” (Algeo 30). Algeo explains that at the height of local color literature, very little literature written by Appalachian natives reached beyond the boundaries of the region.

Since the development of these stereotypes at the hands of reformers, travelers, and local-color writers, Appalachian authors have been inclined to “tell [their] story” (Catte 92) and reclaim the narratives that have been taken from them. While the inclusion of Appalachian narrative in contemporary literature has become more common, literary criticism written on the topic is a fairly recent phenomenon, only beginning after Cratis Williams’s seminal 1961 dissertation, *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction*. In this dissertation, Williams analyzes the stereotypes concerning the mountaineer character in fiction as it represents the Appalachian community. He claims that many writers were “willing to answer the challenge” posed by William Goddell Frost in regard to evaluating the culture of Appalachians (Williams 32). Despite their mistakes and stereotyping, Williams states that there is some truth in fiction written by those who do and do not identify as Appalachian. He suggests that many of the writers

perpetuate the harmful stereotypes regarding Appalachians by assessing the Appalachian community “in terms of general orthodox and conventional American standards, when, in all justice to the mountain people, they should have been assessed in terms of their own standards” (Williams 30). According to Williams, authors such as John Fox Jr., James Still, and Jesse Stuart have unknowingly disgraced the caricature of the mountaineer as he represents Appalachia by being “so entranced by his archaic English, his proverbial lore, his superstitions, and his old-world ballads that they could not hear what he had to say” (Williams 33).

It would seem that critics of Lee Smith’s works have fallen into this same cycle of refusing to acknowledge individual narrative because it does not align with their conceptions of what Appalachian narrative is and should be. Smith’s writing often focuses on dismantling stereotypes regarding Appalachian people, more specifically Appalachian women, in order to demonstrate the diversity that exists within Appalachian narrative and dispel the myth of homogeneity and the single story of Appalachia. With regard to narratives of individuals who have been overlooked in Appalachian culture, many scholars overlook Smith’s earlier novels which often feature young female characters living in Appalachia. In many instances, these characters are young women who are often considered immoral or “ruined” due to various circumstances ranging from affairs to witchcraft. While scholarship on her later works such as her more popular novels *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Oral History* is very common, Smith’s early works have received limited criticism. In an interview with Virginia Smith, “On Regionalism, Women’s Writing, and Writing as a Woman,” Smith explains that her works are intended to portray the everyday heroism and detailed experiences of women who are “ignored by our culture” (qtd. in Smith), those who find ways to be heroic on their own turf. The author details her fascination with the epic journeys of Appalachian women who discover adventure and

empowerment in their daily lives. Smith states that she is not interested in the realities of women who lead perfect or traditionally exciting lives. Instead, she would rather focus on women who use their bodies and senses as a tool to subvert the power dynamics and trials they are subjected to within their surrounding communities and relationships. These women overturn the stereotypes regarding what author Carissa Mathey refers to as the “hillbilly woman,” or the Appalachian woman (Massey 130). In her article “Appalachian Stereotypes: Cultural History, Gender, and Sexual Rhetoric,” Matthews describes depictions of Appalachian women in literature and media that serve to highlight differences within the cultural context of American gender norms that “prizes women as feminine” beings (Massey 130). These differences become apparent in media as Appalachian women are often depicted as “aggressive, overly fecund, and masculine” and generally uncivilized by traditional standards of femininity.

In contrast to these depictions, Smith presents Appalachian women as multifaceted characters who are resilient, creative, and hardworking in an attempt to counter the harmful stereotypes that have followed Appalachians for centuries. In her novels, Smith often depicts imperfect women who utilize their creative abilities as a means of maneuvering through their lives. Furthering this concept, author Danielle Johnson, in her book *Understanding Lee Smith*, claims that Lee Smith tends to “blur the distinction between art and self-expression” while highlighting the skills and interests of women who catalyze change in their daily lives using their creativity but are rarely considered artists in the traditional sense (Johnson 1). Johnson claims that Smith depicts artistry in unconventional ways by “using diaries and oral narratives to structure her novels, she reaffirms the value of personal, and even private, storytelling” (Johnson 2). Johnson states that the heroines of Smith’s novels are often storytellers or writers who use their creativity and skills to navigate their lives. Smith’s earlier characters, referred to as

“watchers” by Lucinda MacKethan, are not associated with the artists described by Danielle Johnson (MacKethan 4). Instead, Johnson suggests that these characters are “doomed” due to their lack of talent or confidence in their abilities (Johnson 3).

MacKethan suggests that Crystal’s character is the most tragic of all of Smith’s female characters due to her static nature and an inability to move forward as a survivor. MacKethan repeatedly describes Smith’s earlier heroines, namely Crystal, as “watchers rather than catalysts” (MacKethan 4). In this article, MacKethan primarily details the creative progression of Smith’s characters, creating a comparison between the “watchers” of her earlier novels and the “catalysts” of her later works (MacKethan 4). These “catalysts” represent the artists mentioned by MacKethan and often include characters such as Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Granny Younger of *Oral History*. These characters are more likely to be regarded as artists because their artistry is represented through mediums that have little stigma surrounding them. However, MacKethan fails to account for Crystal’s exhibition of unconventional creativity because it does not resemble that of Smith’s later heroines due to the stigma surrounding coping mechanisms. While Smith’s later heroines are often writers or storytellers, Crystal demonstrates creativity through her ability to internalize and reflect the expectations of others, a skill that requires a high degree of perception. Her ability to navigate her trauma and fear of being known by capitalizing on the expectations of others establishes her as an artist. Crystal could be considered a “watcher” in the sense that she relies on her perceptions of what others expect from her in order to survive. However, she can also be considered a “catalyst” because she actively and knowingly manipulates those around her as false catalysts to jumpstart the creation of various identities for her to assume.



*Black Mountain Breakdown* opens with a description of Crystal's spectacular beauty provided by a third-person omniscient narrator. This form of narrative allows readers to see beyond Crystal's mercurial behavior and fractured identity and explores her narrative "deeper than her mind can take us" (MacKethan 4). The narrator explains that Crystal's mother, Lorene, was so enamored with the child when she was born that she chose to name her "the prettiest name she could think of" (Smith 14). Lorene, a strong believer in the power of naming in relation to fate, named all of three of her children with the intention that they would live up to their names. This well-meaning manifestation proves to have dire consequences for Crystal as she is subjected to the notions of others as soon as she is born. As Crystal grows, her mother becomes more watchful of the way that she looks and later forces her to dye her hair a brighter shade of blonde before she enters high school. While her aunt dyes her hair, Crystal, despite her usual "nice manners" (Smith 39), tells her mother that she does not want to have her hair toyed with because she would rather be outside enjoying her last summer as a child. Crystal's defiance of her mother is not in accordance with her name; rather than reflecting the Southern values her mother holds regarding the expectations for the behavior of young women, she distorts these expectations. This instance of defiance relates to Smith's depiction of women who defy stereotypes regarding how they should look or act. However, even as a child, Crystal feels the pull of societal expectations and struggles to maintain her autonomy and preserve her personal desires amidst these pressures.

Regarding her struggle to stake out and maintain a singular identity, Crystal's childhood friend, Agnes, believes that "Crystal seems to lack something, some hard thing inside her" that impedes her ability to portray a more easily defined identity and causes her to seek out others to provide an identity for her (Smith 8). Agnes' statement implies that despite being named after a

hard, solid object, Crystal lacks the grit of the object she's named after and is often unable or unwilling to stand her ground against how others think she should act. Furthermore, crystals and rocks are often associated with unchanging, immovable objects. In contrast, Crystal's behavior changes often and she is easily swayed. For instance, "Crystal can't fix upon a handwriting" and writes a different way each day depending upon how she feels, demonstrating her creativity in shaping her identity (Smith 48). Before Crystal is assaulted, her quirky demeanor does not align with the stoic nature that her given name suggests. Later, after suffering a traumatic assault and grappling with the death of her father, Crystal becomes more capricious. However, she is often acting in response to others, rather than of her own accord as she had previously. Subsequently, the pull to adhere to societal and familial expectations becomes stronger as Crystal's defenses are heightened in her attempts to guard herself by creating multiple identities.

It is important to note that Crystal's behavior remains constant in the sense that she has always been mercurial, only seeming at peace with herself and the world around her when listening to her father tell stories. Following his death, Crystal turns to stories in times of distress in order to cope. Crystal's identity is rooted in the past, a past she cannot access due to her repressed memories. Therefore, she seeks out her forgotten memories through stories, demonstrating her artistry through her innovative survival mechanisms. Throughout the novel, she grapples with the difficulties of defining herself in a way that is digestible for others. Her identity is complex, shaped by her overbearing but doting mother, her sickly but fanciful father, her trauma, and her past, yet she often finds solace in traditional means of storytelling through oral or written words. As a child, Crystal's father, Grant, would tell her stories or read her poems through which she developed a love of stories and reading. Though Crystal never attempts to express herself in these forms as the heroines of Smith's later novels have, she feels a strong

connection to stories and uses them in connection with societal expectations to navigate her life and trauma.

Crystal's connection to the past is comparable to the ways in which Appalachians are "consciously turning to their historical and cultural roots as a source of pride, strength, and political identity" (Whisnant 124). Appalachian Studies scholar David Whisnant proposes that many Appalachians are potentially connected by a shared struggle. This struggle is distinct because Appalachians are fighting "against an attempt by mainstream America and its powerful vested interests to contain, subjugate, and destroy a region, its people, and the few remaining fragments of their culture" (Whisnant 125). Whisnant states that while this proposition may not be entirely accurate, it could explain why many Appalachians use the past to ground themselves to the present by forming a solid regional identity. Whisnant explains that this developing regional identity is based on dispelling the melting-pot myth which focuses on the combined culture of America. Instead, the author states that the development of Appalachian identity is focused on distinguishing Appalachians as a distinct group who are shaped by the region but have diverse cultural experiences that comprise the larger culture of Appalachia. Crystal, like many Appalachians, turns to stories of the past as a sort of guide in an attempt to tether her fractured identities to her former self. Crystal's character is notable due to the ways in which she defies concepts of how a survivor should behave and the notion of unconventional artistry as defined by critics of Smith's works. To define Crystal by a singular aspect of her identity or narrative would be an injustice as Crystal is defined by the ways in which she alternates between multiple identities and roles. Similarly, the attempts made by local color writers to define Appalachia using narrow stereotypes and narratives is problematic given that Appalachia is a region marked by the variance of its culture and inhabitants. Crystal's shifting behavior is

reminiscent of the constantly changing nature of Appalachian regional identity to encompass the diversity of the region.

The development of Crystal's shifting identities can be traced to a particular event in her life. The primary shift in Crystal's erratic behavior from a willingness to conform to the expectations of others to a compulsion necessary for survival occurs when she is assaulted. Crystal's disabled uncle, Devere, corners her in a barn and assaults her. In her article "Siblings and Sex: A New Approach to the Fiction of Lee Smith," Martha Billips conducts a feminist reading of the works of Lee Smith in which she examines the recurring theme of sexual abuse and assault by family members in Smith's novels. Billips acknowledges that discussing familial sexual assault in Appalachian literature is fraught with difficulty as one must tread lightly when speaking about incestuous relationships in Appalachia due to stereotypes surrounding the subject. Billips argues that it is important to recognize that these relationship tropes are not included in Smith's novels to accentuate the depravity of Appalachians that is established through stereotypes; instead, these fictional relationships serve to "explore their impact on the girls and women involved" (Billips 6). Furthermore, Billips claims that the descriptions of assaults in Lee Smith's novels suggest a loss of control during the assault which causes the victims, such as Crystal Spangler, to lose their sense of physical and narrative autonomy.

Billips repeatedly references the concept of survivor discourses as it pertains to the ways in which survivors of sexual assault express narrative autonomy by speaking out about their trauma as a means of recuperation. Survivor discourse, according to Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray in their article "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?", is characterized by evaluating the repositioning of survivor discourses or narratives "from the individual psyche to the social sphere where it rightfully belongs" (Alcoff & Gray 261). Alcoff and Gray claim that

survivors of sexual assault are considered by society to transcend passive victimhood and take on the role of a survivor of sexual violence when they share their stories in the public realm in a way that is palatable for others. The authors explain that this narrow definition of what it means to be a survivor as opposed to a victim often excludes the narratives of many individuals who have experienced sexual assault. Survivorship is accompanied by additional standards regarding what circumstances constitute assault. For instance, individuals who experience sexual assault at the hands of a close family relation or spouse are often discredited because their attacker is often granted some physical and social access to the victim by virtue of their relation to each other.

There is an irony in the popular understanding of what defines an individual as a survivor given that this understanding requires that victims censor and condense their narrative in a specific manner in order to be qualified as a survivor, a more extensively limiting label. The authors contend that the dominant concept of survivor discourse is transgressive and problematic in many instances as it implies that there is a correct way to be a survivor. By these popular standards, as suggested by Martha Billips, the character of Crystal Spangler is more of a passive victim as opposed to a survivor due to her inability to voice her narrative and reclaim her identity. Billips' assessment of Crystal as a victim rather than a survivor is problematic because it suggests that Crystal is not a survivor in the correct way outlined by traditional understandings of survivors discourse. It is unjust to imply that those who have experienced sexual assault must subject themselves to the scrutiny and opinions of society in order to be recognized as a survivor. In opposition to Billips' assessment, I feel that Crystal's behavior exemplifies her role as an active survivor given that she utilizes her creativity as a means of innovation to manipulate and reflect external expectations to suit her goal of remaining unknown to those around her as a means of protecting her narrative.

Crystal's behavior shifts from a willingness to conform to a compulsion following being assaulted. Crystal protects herself and Devere by refraining from sharing the details of the event when she realizes that Devere does not understand what he has done. In an attempt to distract herself from what is happening to her, Crystal recites lines of Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in which the speaker stops in the middle of the woods to watch the snow fall at night. An analysis of this poem gives important insight into the shift in Crystal's behavior. In this poem, the speaker claims that the owner of the land where the woods are located will not be present to see them stopping to "watch his woods fill up with snow" (Frost 4). After watching the snow slowly fall for some time, the speaker's horse begins to show signs of restlessness, encouraging the speaker to continue on their journey. The speaker, noting the allure of the "lovely, dark, and deep" woods (Frost 13), reluctantly concedes to move forward stating that "I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep" (Frost 14). This poem could be interpreted as an allegory for the ways in which societal expectations and responsibilities prevent one from acting on their true desires. As Crystal recites the poem, she thinks to herself that her classmates believed it was about Santa Claus but her understanding has changed. Crystal repeats the poem and lingers on the line "my little horse must think it queer to stop without a farmhouse on the darkest evening of the year" (Frost 5). Crystal infantilizes Devere and decides that, like the "little horse," he is unaware of the gravity of what has occurred (Frost 5). It would seem that Crystal decides that she is unable to tell others about the assault due to her reputation and that of her uncle. In this instance, Crystal may feel that she would be met with disbelief due to her uncle's impairment and her familial relation to her rapist. Her decision seems to be influenced by the dominant discourses of survivors discourse in which many victims of sexual assault are not likely to be taken seriously due to the circumstances of the assault. Crystal's choice to keep the

assault a secret forces her to repress her memory of the event in order to move forward, permanently altering her identity and the ways she expresses herself, and yet she is still a survivor and not “just” a victim.

This sort of restriction or altering of identity due to sexual trauma is a common theme in the works of Lee Smith. In an interview with Linda Cook, Smith states that her characters often break through the physical, emotional, and societal boundaries that restrict their expression “through the body” (qtd in Cook). Smith explains that throughout her novels, her young heroines, including Susan of *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968), Crystal of *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980), and Molly of *On Agate Hill* (2006), experience a bodily trauma that prevents them from expressing themselves in a traditionally healthy or creative manner. It would seem that many critics view Smith’s younger characters as unable to claim and exhibit their identities because they struggle to reclaim their bodies and bridge the gap between their trauma and healthy expression. Crystal’s method of expression, while it may not be considered healthy, is cathartic as it relieves her of the anxieties that authenticity incites in her. Crystal’s coping mechanisms—their own kind of unconventional artistry—are often disregarded by critics like MacKethan because of the stigma surrounding mental health and survivors discourse. Although Crystal’s artistry and narrative as a survivor is altered due to the bodily trauma she experiences, it is not absent in the way that many critics suggest. I posit that Crystal purposefully conceals her authentic self in order to protect her narrative.

After the assault, Crystal’s father dies. In the midst of her grief, Crystal ends her relationship with her steady boyfriend, Roger Lee Combs, and begins dating a young delinquent named Mack Stiltner. The narrator acknowledges that Crystal dates whomever she pleases despite her mother’s disapproval. In compensation, she becomes very popular and is a model

student to please her mother in an attempt to balance expectations. Crystal claims that “with Mack she feels like she can be herself, whatever *that* means” (Smith 98). Crystal feels most comfortable around Mack initially because he has no expectations of how she should behave and accepts her strange behavior. Though her friends and family do not agree with their relationship, Crystal does not mind because Mack offers a reprieve from living up to the expectations of everyone else in her life. The narrator explains that Mack thinks that “there’s a lot of things it’s hard to know for sure about Crystal” (Smith 96). Mack notes that it is difficult to be close to Crystal because he can often “feel her drawing back into herself,” never allowing others to intimately know her. After dating for some time, Crystal’s relationship with Mack turns sour after he plays her a song he wrote about her that describes her evasive behavior. The song greatly upsets Crystal and Mack responds by telling her that “[she] can’t have it all” and needs to decide who she is and what she wants. Mack’s blatant confrontation is deeply unsettling to Crystal because he has gotten too close to seeing her for who she truly is. In this instance, Mack reveals that he does have expectations for Crystal in which she stops trying to live up to others’ expectations and is wholly herself. This suggests that Crystal is uncomfortable in relationships with individuals who try to see beyond the reflection she provides of what she thinks they want. To avoid this discomfort, Crystal often surrounds herself with people who expect her to conform with their expectations or opinions about her. Her capricious behavior in response to these expectations ensures that no one can ever bring awareness to her fractured identity and disconnection from her past.

Crystal values her relationship with Mack because he is the only character who accepts her as she is and never imparts his expectations onto her prior to their argument. Following their argument regarding her evasive behavior, Crystal begins to distance herself from Mack. Their



relationship ends when Crystal agrees to compete in the Black Rock High School Beauty Contest at her mother's request. While on stage, Crystal looks out into the audience and sees that Mack did not save her a seat, signifying his expectation that she would win and reserving a seat would not be necessary. Noting these expectations, Crystal feels compelled to win and later admits that "[she] didn't have any choice" (Smith 177) because everyone, including Mack, expected her to win. Crystal, recognizing that her relationship with Mack is no longer sacred and devoid of expectations, stops pursuing him entirely. Without Mack, Crystal has no one to turn to as a reprieve from external expectations and accepts that she must continue to rely on the expectations of others to guide her life. The end of Crystal's relationship with Mack is significant because it forces her to completely isolate herself emotionally from others as she views his developing expectations as a rejection in which he cannot accept her true self.

Unable to express herself authentically in any way, Crystal begins searching for someone or something new to guide her behavior and stumbles upon organized religion. Crystal turns to Christianity because it promises salvation, though she is not looking to be saved from her sins. Rather, she is searching for the acceptance that Mack offered her and salvation from her compulsion to reflect and embody the expectations of others. Shortly after winning the beauty contest, Crystal is invited to a tent revival by her neighbor, Jubal Thacker, where she is baptized. The tent revival differs from traditional sermons as the evangelist preacher, Fred Lee Sampson, likens religion to a business exchange rather than focusing on biblical narratives of times past. Fred Lee Sampson describes this exchange in which being saved is an insurance policy that guarantees entry to heaven. In her journal article, "*Changing Times and Changing Metaphors in Fictional Sermons*," Martha Billips Turner analyzes fictional sermons in Appalachian literature as signals of environmental and social changes in the region. In this article, Turner calls attention

to the similarities between the changes Appalachia undergoes as a result of modernization and those experienced by Crystal as she struggles to connect to her true identity while attempting to reflect the expectations of others. Turner primarily evaluates the role of Fred Lee Sampson's sermon as it pertains to Crystal's shifting identity in the novel. Turner suggests that the shift from biblical narratives in sermons to those with business models as the basis suggest that modern Appalachia's shift to commercialism results in the loss of "connection to the past" and a "genuine sense of identity" (Turner 131). Similarly, the sermon does not save Crystal from her compulsions and instead severs her attempts to connect with her past self by providing her with a new set of values to model herself after.

Crystal's introduction to religion causes her to stray further from her connection to the past and intentionally rely more heavily on external forces for guidance. The narrator states that the sermon causes Crystal to feel "like she felt when she was with Mack -- alive, fully alive and fully real" (Smith 126). It is important to note that Crystal compares her newfound religious fervor to her sexual experiences with men, primarily Mack Stiltner. This comparison suggests that Crystal longs for the acceptance and freedom of expression she experienced with Mack. Crystal's quest for acceptance is indicative of her role as a survivor whose methods of coping are incredibly stigmatized. I believe that Crystal's search for a figurative space in the past to place results from the lack of acceptance she receives in the present. Essentially, Crystal longs to return to her past and a time when she felt acknowledged for her authentic self because her authentic narrative as a survivor is not accepted by others in the present. Turner suggests that while the business-oriented language of the sermon does not appeal to Crystal's "need to hear stories from the past", it does prey upon her impressionable nature and her need to feel accepted (Turner 136). Following the revival, Crystal relishes her salvation and the joy of "giving herself

to Jesus Christ and being nothing at all” (Smith 128). Crystal begins to act in the manner she thinks is expected of her, “studying the bible” daily and singing “hymns around the house” while she cleans (Smith 130). Despite the facade of salvation that Crystal presents to others, she claims that she is “only conscious of her salvation” when other people speak to her about it (Smith 139). Crystal’s statement suggests that religion, despite its ancient origins, does not grant her access to her past. In spite of her intense reaction to the revival as it is reminiscent of her experiences with men, it “ultimately leaves her empty and unfulfilled” (Turner 138). Crystal quickly grows bored of religion because it is too restrictive and does not allow her to adequately fulfill the roles expected of her by others without sinning.

Crystal abandons religion and continues the thematic cycle of relying on others to regulate her identity formation and returns to seeking out men to guide her behavior. She often romanticizes the idea of being untouchable and adored by men which fuels her need to pursue relationships for the sake of guidance. Occasionally, Crystal daydreams about relationships, stating that “a man in this country loves her, a poet with burning eyes” and “although she responds to the spiritual passion of this doomed poet, she can never be his” (Smith 135). Crystal’s daydreams about being untouchable suggest that she often acts intentionally to avoid intimacy with others and to protect herself and her narrative from rejection. As a survivor, Crystal is subjected to societal standards regarding how a survivor should behave and share the details of their experiences. Crystal instinctively knows that her narrative will be rejected by others due to the circumstances of her assault. Therefore, she feels the need to protect her narrative through evasive coping mechanisms that allow her to keep her true identity out of the reach of societal expectations. Provoked by these daydreams of remaining untouchable, Crystal returns to frequently dating as a means of supplying expectations on which to base her identity as

she believes that she is capable of protecting her true self from their expectations. The narrator explains that “[Crystal] doesn’t feel real when she’s by herself or perhaps it’s only that she doesn’t feel again the way she felt with Mack or the way she felt the night when she was saved” (Smith 139). In this instance, Crystal’s lack of introspection suggests that in her attempts to keep her narrative out of the reach of others, she has made it inaccessible to herself by repressing her memories of the past. In compensation, Crystal uses her hypersexuality as a means of gaining close proximity to men because “it’s only when she’s with boys that she feels pretty, or popular, or fun” (Smith 140). The narrator claims that “Crystal can see what [boys] think of her, and then that’s the way she is” (Smith 140). In this instance, the narrator acknowledges that Crystal is acutely aware of the expectations of others and that she intentionally makes the decision to repeatedly change her identity. I feel that this recognition on behalf of the narrator dispels all arguments that Crystal is a passive observer in her own life and proves that she is actively using those around her to influence her demeanor. Crystal is not a victim to the parasitism of the external world. Rather, I posit that Crystal’s relationship with those around her is comparable to commensalism in which she somewhat benefits from the expectations of others because they allow her to evade revealing her true identity at no cost to their own well-being. While this cycle of relationships aids Crystal’s purpose in evading intimacy, it proves to be unsustainable for long periods of time.

As a consequence of her unsustainable relationships, Crystal’s facade begins to break down as she grows tired of changing herself to meet others’ expectations. Her inability to sustain her multiple identities foreshadows the gradual reclamation of her authentic identity through her artistry and her eventual paralysis. After the sudden death of her newest boyfriend, Jerold Kukafka, Crystal is briefly institutionalized, an incident that prompts her to return to her

childhood home in Black Rock. However, when Crystal returns there is no one left to guide her behavior as her friends and family have moved on in her absence as a result of the recent financial prosperity of the town “so Crystal is nothing to talk about, in comparison” (Smith 176). The narrator states that Crystal is grateful that Black Rock has become a boom town since she left because “she has changed, too” and is able to relax in the absence of external influences on her behavior (Smith 176). Without her mother, romantic partners, or friends to guide her behavior, Crystal feels secure enough to reveal her true self as it is temporarily safe from the influence of external forces. In the absence of expectations, Crystal begins to demonstrate more traditional forms of artistry. For example, after being invited to a baby shower, Crystal builds a baby mobile from scratch. An old friend tells Crystal that she is creative, leaving her to wonder if she is truly creative. Later, she makes felt bird ornaments to sell at a craft fair and begins to take pride in her work. Crystal’s feelings of pride suggest that her creativity is authentic rather than a response to expectations others have regarding her as an artist. Though her conventional artistry is short lived, it is significant to note that Crystal is constantly demonstrating her unconventional artistic abilities in the form of coping mechanisms. The narrator states that Crystal is initially shocked by her own creativity, claiming that the idea for the mobile originated from “some reservoir deep in her mind-- and who knows what else might be lurking down there” (Smith 177). I posit that, in this instance, the narrator foreshadows Crystal’s gradual reclamation of her identity and the return of her repressed memories. Though Crystal’s narrative reclamation is not finalized until she decides to paralyze herself, there are several events that empower her to salvage her narrative. For example, while selling ornaments at the craft fair, Crystal realizes that she enjoys working and notes that her previous jobs were dependent upon “whatever man she was with” (Smith 179). By noting that she made decisions based on her romantic relationships in

the past, Crystal acknowledges the cyclical nature of her behavior in which she seeks out men to control her life for her. Her acknowledgement suggests that she is not passively entering relationships as suggested by critics such as MacKethan. Rather, Crystal is an active participant in her relationships as they serve as guides on which to base her behavior. It occurs to Crystal “that she should find a job-- that she *could* find a job” (Smith 179). Crystal’s realization suggests that she is beginning to act outside of what others think she “should” do. Instead, she focuses on her internal potential and what she “could” do. Fueled by the empowerment her recognition of her own potential brings, Crystal lands a teaching job at Black Rock High School. Crystal excels at instructing even the most difficult students by inventing creative assignments to help them understand the material, another example of her unique artistry that often goes unrecognized. As Crystal’s confidence in her abilities and artistry grows, she begins to exhibit a more solid, authentic identity that is reminiscent of her past self. By demonstrating a healthier form of artistry, Crystal is beginning to heal herself and bridge the connection between her former self and her multiple identities. Though Crystal’s more conventional artistry is short lived, the empowerment it brings will later fuel her narrative reclamation as a survivor and salvage her connection to the past through her paralysis

Crystal’s path towards reclamation is quickly stunted as she finds herself in a relationship with her former lover, Roger Lee Combs, whose overbearing expectations and verbal assault of Crystal halts her progress. After years of separation, Roger wrecks Crystal’s newfound authenticity by convincing her that she needs him to “make [her] happy” (Smith 208). Roger mocks her new life, asking: “What are you going to do Crystal? Teach junior high school for the rest of your life?” (Smith 209). Roger’s calm demeanor as he ridicules the way she expresses herself suggests that he is aware that he is disarming her ability to defend herself and continue

forging her authentic narrative, a narrative that would exclude him. Author John D. Kalb describes Roger's attempt at seduction as "a much more violent, debilitating attack" than that she experienced at the hands of Devere. Roger's figurative assault is damaging to Crystal in the sense that it permanently alters her attempts to connect with her authentic self and come to terms with her role as a survivor. I feel that Roger abuses his role as a component of Crystal's past prior to the assault and uses this connection as leverage to manipulate her and draw her into the figurative abyss of her hero's journey, leading her back into the dark. The final blow comes when Roger reminds Crystal, "I've known you all your life, remember?" (Smith 209). Roger completely disarms Crystal by suggesting that he possesses information about her former self, information she desperately craves. Crystal's need for connection to the past drives the gradual reclamation of her identity as well as her temporary undoing by Roger. Roger's control over Crystal alters the course of her narrative reclamation and forces her back into the cycle of relying on the presence of other people to reflect an image through her, once again invoking the refractive quality her name suggests. Crystal is unable to resist the temptations of reprieve in the form of coping mechanisms. When faced with Roger's powerful influence, Crystal finds that it is "so comforting, really, to have somebody again to tell her what to do" (Smith 212). Crystal grows to love Roger, initially relishing in the comfort his control provides. However, Crystal is afraid to share her true narrative with Roger in their relationship, believing that "if she tells him anything at all, then she might tell him everything-- about her not sleeping, about the way she is conscious of endings and edges -- and then he won't love her anymore" (Smith 221). I posit that the phrase "endings and edges" refers to Crystal's sense of changing expectations and the ways in which she feels compelled to respond to them, ending one narrative to begin another. This term could also foreshadow the end of Crystal's relationship with Roger and her reclamation.

Though Crystal is not acting as a passive victim in her relationship with Roger, her willingness to give in to Roger's expectations signifies a moment of weakness in which her budding sense of self cannot withstand the force of confrontation. Therefore, it is easier for her to give in as a means of protecting herself against the potential damage caused by Roger's influence.

The thematic cycle in which Crystal reflects the expectations of others comes to an end when she decides to paralyze herself and finally reclaim the narrative that was taken from her in the various assaults made by Roger and Devere. While touring a local mental institution for Roger's campaign, Crystal encounters a young boy who resembles Devere. Her encounter with the boy prompts her to recall her repressed memories of being assaulted by Devere as a teenager. The narrator suggests that Crystal murders the boy in her dissociated state and the ordeal is covered up by Roger. Following the incident, Crystal returns to Black Rock to live with her mother. When Agnes asks why Crystal decided to return home, Crystal claims it was because she met a boy that she believed "knew [her]" intimately (Smith 237). Agnes responds that Crystal's belief provides no reasonable justification for leaving Roger and returning home. Unwilling to experience any more rejection of her authentic narrative, Crystal paralyzes herself. I posit that Crystal's paralysis is the ultimate form of narrative authority in which she reclaims her identity from the external world and internalizes her narrative. Her decision to remove her narrative from the public sphere, where it has the potential to be subjected to the damaging expectations of others, to the private sphere suggests that Crystal has achieved her goal of being untouchable. Crystal's paralysis also serves to demonstrate her artistry in which she devises a unique way of avoiding expectations and protecting her narrative from outsiders. Through her paralysis, Crystal refuses to partake in the harmful perpetuation of the dominant narratives of survivor discourse in which sexual assault survivors are expected to share their narrative in a particular way and open



themselves up to the possibility of ridicule and rejection. By refusing to share her narrative, authentic or performative, in any way, Crystal reclaims her past and present solely for herself. Given that Crystal no longer needs to seek out external forces to guide her narrative or provide her with information about her past, she is finally at peace.

In conclusion, I posit that the narrative of Crystal Spangler as it is presented in *Black Mountain Breakdown* by Lee Smith should be interpreted as a story of empowerment rather than a cautionary tale. Crystal, while often dismissed as a passive victim by critics of Lee Smith's works due to her fractured identity, demonstrates her role as an active survivor through her creative coping mechanisms which serve as evasive maneuvers to protect her authentic self from the harmful influence of external forces. Crystal's fear of sharing her authentic narrative speaks to the larger ramifications of critics' negative reception of Crystal's character in *Black Mountain Breakdown*. Repeatedly dismissing Crystal's character on the basis that she does not meet their expectations as a survivor or an unconventional artist suggests that they, too, have internalized a wrongful understanding of transcendental victimhood as it pertains to the concept of survivor discourse. This problematic understanding of victimhood and artistry on behalf of many critics suggests that there is a correct way to behave as a survivor and an artist and excludes those who do not fit these narrow definitions such as Crystal. Additionally, the ways in which Crystal's character is often ignored or misinterpreted by scholars and critics of Smith's work could be compared to the misrepresentation of Appalachian narrative due to stereotypes and caricatures in literature. While these stereotypes and opinions may shape Appalachian narrative, similarly to the ways in which outside expectations shape Crystal's behavior, they do not possess the nuance and diversity necessary to define Appalachia. Likewise, dominant understandings of the narrow

labels of artist and survivor lack the complexity to define Crystal as her character transcends traditional concepts of survivorship and artistry.

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