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Piece of the Berlin Wall at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, presented to
him on 12 April 1990.

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‘I ain’t never seen a nigger’: the discourse of denial in Lee Smith’s *The Devil’s Dream*  

Daniel T. Stein

**Abstract**

This essay investigates the marginalization of African American musical culture in Appalachian native Lee Smith’s novel *The Devil’s Dream* (1992). It contrasts the author’s fictional treatment of country-music history with musicological and historical documentation of cross-cultural interaction between black and white folk musicians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, the essay traces a discourse of denial through which the first-person narrators of the novel negate black influences while implicitly acknowledging them.

**Keywords**

Lee Smith  
*S The Devil’s Dream  
Southern regionalism  
Country music history  
Denial of black presence

**Workings of denial and the Africanist presence**

[1] The subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive: an extraordinary meditation on the self, a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this. 

The uneasy denial of an African American presence in the fictional Appalachia of Lee Smith’s novel *The Devil’s Dream* is best understood through Toni Morrison’s deconstruction of literary whiteness and her rereading of American literature with its close connections to a ‘black presence’ in America. Smith creates an assortment of first-person narratives told by fictional characters: some of them are based on historical figures who recount the story of country music and its developments among white Appalachian family musicians as an exclusively ‘white’ phenomenon. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison laments the conventional ‘knowledge’ among literary critics, which ‘holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninform ed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States’.  

Morrison continues: [S]uch knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence.  

Tracing the establishment of literary traditions from the very beginnings of colonial literature, Morrison discerns a continuum of influence that this ‘Africanist presence’ has exerted on constructions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Americanness’: “Through significant and

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46 See ibid., p. 115.  
underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced con-
licts, through the way writers peopled their works with the signs and
bodies of this presence - one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist
presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.19

Morrison’s observations illuminate the marginalized position of
African Americans and the denied influence of black modes of expressiv-
ity on the Anglo-Saxon mountain culture portrayed in The Devil’s
Dream. African Americans appear in the stories of the Appalachian nar-
rators mainly as ‘niggers’; they never speak and are never granted a
voice of their own. This ambiguous position - neither wholly excluded
nor allowed into the narrative realm as subjects rather than objects -
evokes a quality of Americanness in the self-definitions and the music of
the white mountaineers that purports to be separated (geographically as
well as culturally) from the Africanist presence in American literature
and culture. Since black musicians are neither completely banned from
the text nor given significant space and attention, simple assessments of
exclusion must be substituted for Morrison’s ‘significant and under-
scored omissions’. [the] startling contradictions’ that characterize Smith’s
literary involvement with a ‘fabricated Africanist presence’.7

Morrison’s criticisms inform the following analysis of works of
a denial in The Devil’s Dream, which underlie the marginalization of ‘black’
contributions to country music as they appear in the accounts of
Smith’s storytellers and as they are reproduced by the author herself
through her choice of speakers, narrative perspective, and setting. Even
if, as one might argue, Smith’s historical fiction substitutes the multicult-
ural origins of country music with a depiction of the ‘authentic’
thoughts and words of isolated mountain musicians, her narrative grap-
ples with its invocation of a ‘fabricated’ presence or, more aptly, with an
acknowledgement of a black influence on Appalachian mountain life
through an insistence on its absence.

In an essay titled ‘Southern Exposure’, Smith contends that ‘the
whole South runs on denial ... The traditionally Southern way to handle
problems is by not mentioning them, the very definition of denial’. Talking
about her own family, she mentions sex, death, mental illness, politics, and
divorce as topics that ‘had been edited right out of the family ...’ Absent from her
enumeration are the ambiguous attitudes toward African Americans that the
speakers in The Devil’s Dream express and which are deeply embedded in the
text. As the passage from Playing in the Dark quoted at the beginning of this essay suggests, Smith’s treat-
ment of the African American presence should be seen as an extension
of the writer’s own struggle with what being an American in the South
means. If Morrison is correct in assuming that the portrayal of blacks in
the fiction of white writers is a reflexive, an ‘extraordinary meditation
on the self’ and ‘a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that
reside in the writerly consciousness’, then we cannot ignore the prob-
lematic implications that the denial of the influence of black musicians
on country music and on Appalachia in general have on the authorial
position from which Smith writes.9

We can understand the concept of denial in Lee Smith’s fiction as a
continuous repression of memories of (racial) conflict that the narrators
have not been able to resolve and which remain a significant disturb-
ance in their lives. A number of critics have written on the practice of
negation (the verbal expression of denial) in William Faulkner’s Absalom,
Absalom! (1936), and we can utilize some of their ideas for our discus-
sion of The Devil’s Dream. Winfried Herget detects a paradox in the lin-
guistic phenomenon of the negation: ‘[I]n words something comes into
existence by the assertion of its non-existence, something becomes a
mental presence by the linguistic act which posits its absence’.10 Thus,
when Alice Bailey, one of Smith’s narrators, states, ‘I ain’t never seen a
nigger’ (‘note the vernacular double negative ’ain’t never’), she acknow-
edges the presence of African Americans by insisting on their absence.
She does this with the objective of satisfying the people present at her
act of speaking: ‘[I]n order to make sense, such negations have to be
related to some expectancy. In a communicative act they have to be
interpreted in terms of the underlying expectations - the implicit
assumptions - on the part of the speaker/writer, or in terms of what the
listener reader is presupposed to expect.’11

These social forces, safeguarding the realm of acceptable speech, are
supported by psychological factors. François Pitàvy maintains in his
reading of Absalom, Absalom! that ‘a negative statement allows the
analyst to have access to what has been repressed; the negation lifts the
repression, yet without acceptance of the repressed material.’12

Translating Freudian theory into the context of Faulkner’s literary
South, Herget detects workings of denial that reappear in The Devil’s
Dream. He notes about Rosa Coldfield, one of the characters in Absalom,
Absalom!, that

[b]y denying certain hopes, fears, and intentions, she is compelled to
acknowledge them. Taken as a strategy of evasion, her negations can be
interpreted in light of Freud’s observation that negation serves to express
the suppressed. Furthermore, in the process of accumulating negations,
imagination and language tend to turn upon themselves. The way in
which experience is made up in the telling assumes a greater significance
than the actual experience it refers to may have had.13

The repeated marginalization of African Americans and their music in
the accounts of The Devil’s Dream’s storytellers suggest that the limited
impact of black culture on the narrative universe of the novel has taken
on such tremendous weight because it has been denied and wished away
for so long and with such vehemence. Pitàvy’s statement that
‘negativity can be seen as the unconscious of discourse - unconscious,
but existing as a constituent’, comes to mind here.14

...the discourse of denial in Lee Smith’s The Devil’s Dream
In *The Devil’s Dream*, we can find residues of these repressed experiences. The storytellers feel the need to deny their connections with African American culture because black music is an integral part of their own music-making traditions; it is reflected in the country music they play and in their definitions of community. Racial inclusion and interaction, however, clash with the narrative of Anglo-Saxon genealogy, racial purity, and social stability that is becoming more and more essential with the growing impact of industrialization and modernization, which threaten to overthrow traditional life in the mountains.

Beginning the narrative in the nineteenth century, before the Civil War, and ending it in the 1970s, Smith tells more than the story of the Bailey family; she depicts country music from its infancy to its recent forms and populates the monumental transitions the American South has undergone in the twentieth century. Smith shows a secluded society of rural Appalachian mountain folk who fight social change and embrace a vicious brand of cultural and religious conservatism when they are faced with modernization, commercialized entertainment, and racial integration. The blurring of cultural, regional, and racial identities endangers the stability of the mountain society, and it is therefore perceived as a threat by its members, who, because of their past of relatively social isolation, see the increasing dismantling of racial boundaries with suspicion and fear. Since *The Devil’s Dream* takes the story of country music as its main subject, we must also investigate if Smith’s focus on the Appalachian Mountains as an exclusively Anglo-Saxon birthplace of country music constitutes a form of historical reductionism - a neglect of country music’s multi-regional and multi-racial roots.

Smith refers to the Appalachian mountain hollers (the small and isolated valleys between mountains) and the poor south-west Virginia valley in which the narrated action of *The Devil’s Dream* unfolds as ‘an almost secret South’. In terms of social and cultural life, they present a unique setting: ‘[t]heir formidable geography acted as a natural barrier for so long - keeping others out, holding us in, allowing for the development of our rich folk culture, our distinctive speech patterns, our strong sense of tradition and our radical individualism. Appalachian people are more rooted than other Southerners.’

Smith explains, belong to the novels of Faulkner and are part of a South characterized by slavery and an attachment of people ‘to the soil in a mystical blood-bound Faulknerian way’. Appalachian mountain folk, we are told, have nothing in common with the Deep South:

... Appalachia has no resemblance to the rest of the South. I grew up in the mountains, so a lot of my experience is very different from the great ... Deep South writers ... [That has given me a wonderful source for my fiction. Very little about Appalachia is like the Deep South - I mean we never had any black people, we never had any racial guilt ...
nineteenth century ... these Appalachian residents were "con- nected" with others in significant ways." See "Early Appalachian Communities through the Lenses of History, Geography, and Sociology," in The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities, ed. David Colin Cronn, et al. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998, pp. 162. 172.

22 Insee, p. 123.


24 Smith opposes the assumption that the South is a homogenous region and stresses her characters' status as outsiders. Lazy, who is Nannie and Birdie's daughter, recalls seeing the Ballleys playing.

Mark A. Sanders formulates a method of interpreting transcribed oral histories by reading between the lines as well as beyond the surface story. He urges critics to 'read for the silences, the fissures, for disjunc- ture and the moments of upheaval the method of composition necessar- ily creates.' Gele's and Sanders's observations offer possibilities of rereading The Devil's Dream in order to excavate what remains untold, repressed, and denied by contrasting narrative dynamics with scholar- ship on the cross-cultural constitution of country music.

The Devil's Dream and music history

African American influences on Appalachian music can be divided into four stages, which Robert Cantwell summarizes as follows:

Deeply conservative in nature and protected by isolated circumstances from sweeping or cataclysmic change, Appalachian music displays an ontogony of black influences that represents stages in the life of mountain culture, from early Piedmont migrations, to the visits of minstrel shows on the riverboats, to the incursion of the railroads and, finally, of radio and phonograph.

The first stage of black cultural influence on America began before the settlement of the Appalachian hollers. The roles and functions of music in African cultures and the transmutations of African traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America established a black sensibility in American music. Cantwell cites a number of references to black musical activity by writers as prominent as Thomas Jefferson, who reported in 1781: "The instrument proper to them [slaves] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords [strings] being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar." In addition to introducing the banjo to American culture, black slaves saw in music a process of communication and creative improvisation that included polyrhythms, syncopation, and audience participation, all of which could be found in many early forms of folk and country music.

In The Devil's Dream's first segment, we listen to several speakers structure their lives and the life of the community in narrative form. Although fiddle-playing, singing, and dancing are presented in Old Man Ira Keen's story as the guiding forces for the Malone family and for himself, there are no references to slave fiddlers despite the fact that they, according to Bill C. Malone, 'were omnipresent in the South in the nineteenth century', an assessment corroborated by Robert B. Winans's study of references to fiddle- and banjo-playing in the narratives of ex- slaves. 'The Devil's Dream', the song that is played and sung in Smith's novel and which gives it its title, is not only a Scottish air but is also quoted by Winans among the tunes former slaves were playing in the late nineteenth century. Southern musical traditions, as The

"Malignant Man";

'That ballad captures such a feeling of otherness, of being outside, cut off from the rest of humanity, that I never heard them sing it without feeling a chill." Italicized in the original. Lee Smith, The Devil's Dream, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992, p. 104.


26 Quoted in Loewenstein, pp. 117, 125.


...the discourse of denial in Lee Smith's The Devil's Dream...
Devil’s Dream’ exemplifies, are subject to multiple mixings and perpetual cross-influencing.

While the fervently Baptist Bailey family sees the fiddle as the devil’s instrument and condemns those who play it as possessed by the devil, the reader is not privy to the inspirations and motivations of the less isolated and less conservative Malone family.38 This is crucial: they live in Cana, a small town less remote than the Bailey’s home in the mountains and a place of possible contact with black music, even if only in the appropriated form of minstrelsy and blackface comedy. Furthermore, Zeke (Kate and Moses Bailey’s son) undertakes frequent trips to country dances outside the hollers, but there are no reports of encounters with black culture in any form.

The choice of an unnamed voice for the portrayal of people who go beyond the mountains illuminates Smith’s interest in presenting life from the community’s point of view. By denying Zeke a voice in the novel, she demonstrates how the storyteller who narrates his life employs it as a warning for others not to submit to the lure of city-life and as a means of passing on the community’s suspicion toward influences from the outside.40 In adhering to the restrictive communal point of view, Smith, however, also denies the reader an alternative glance at this world outside and thus prevents us from challenging her narrator’s version of Zeke’s life.

Following the chapter on Zeke is a striking account of an interracial relationship between a Melungeon man named Jake Toney and the Appalachian girl Nonnie Flahett. Melungeons, according to Smith, are a ‘white racial group, they live in East Tennessee... Some people think they were the lost tribe of Roanoke Island; other people think they were Portuguese who were shipwrecked and intermarried with black Americans and Native Americans’.41 Again, the narrative perspective excludes the voice of those involved in the act of violating the mores of the mountain society: Zinia, Nonnie’s ‘ugly’ and jealous sister, recalls the events. While Nonnie describes Jake as ‘not from around here’ and ‘real different-looking’, Zinia is quick to endorse her father’s assessment of the situation: ‘... Daddy told us about the Melungeons, that is a race of people which nobody knows where they came from, with real pale light eyes, and dark skin, and frizzy hair like sheep’s wool ... “Niggers won’t claim a Melungeon”, Daddy told us. “Injun’s won’t claim them neither”.’42 On the following pages, we learn of the negative reactions of members of the community, who call Nonnie’s baby ‘a Melungeon’s leavings’ and cause her father to send Nonnie away and force her to marry Zeke.43

The Melungeon episode is an example of the discourse established and perpetuated by the mountain storytellers. In Foucaultian analysis, discourse is a set of meanings ‘that conditions what counts as knowledge in a particular period’ in history.44 Looking at ‘discursive formations’, Foucault detects rules that regulate what is talked about and in which way. Discourse theories also link language to social control: discursive formations govern the ‘serious possibilities for talking about things’ and exercise power over the expression of marginalized social groups.45 In The Devil’s Dream, the rules of communication are determined by a patriarchal order that is often enforced violently. Thus, the complex conflict between Moses Bailey and his wife and children when they disobey his rules of behavior: through sexual domination – Zinia’s father, Claude, rapes her mother, Effie. Religious doctrine provides additional legitimation: Claude justifies his actions by calling them God’s will.

Nonnie’s romantic involvement with Jake shows her fascination with the racial Other and her desire to transgress the boundaries her community has erected to prevent cultural and social change. Dreams of escape and of a life away from home are permitted because they help people cope with the hardships in their lives, allowing them to go on narrative excursions and explore imaginary territory coded in language and song. However, to act upon these fantasies means to give in to what Donlon calls ‘impulses toward intimacy [that] are forced to compete with anxieties that accompany unfamiliarity’ and to risk exclusion from the tribe because it challenges the group’s social codes.46 The inclusion of Nonnie’s affair into the narrative thus exemplifies the elaborate workings of denial: Zinia knows what has happened, and she is eager to reshape the events into a story of her own desires and fantasies, but she undermines the reality of Nonnie’s actions by calling her ‘dreamy’ and ‘bent on destruction’.47

A second period of interaction between black music and Appalachian mountain musicians unfolded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when mobility increased because of improved roads and when minstrel and medicine shows delivered music, comedy, and working-class entertainment to remote areas in the South.48 Malone explains how the music and instruments of African Americans made their way into the mountains. Even before radio and records, he argues, ‘black folk musicians had been seen and heard on street corners or in work camps. Both the guitar and the blues form may have ventured into the mountains with black laborers who followed the highways and railroads as they gradually inched their way up the Appalachian ridges.’

Interfaces between the Appalachian mountain folk and black culture often occurred when the mountaineurs left the hollers for work camps and small towns and on occasion joined travelling entertainment ensembles. In The Devil’s Dream, R.C. Bailey talks about working in lumber camps and fiddling at night. He never mentions encounters with African Americans or with their music, but his anger and pain over the discovery of his Melungeon father illuminate the deep fear of the racial Other he retains outside of the hollers.49 Because of his hatred for the non-white blood in his heritage, and because of the racist attitudes common among Appalachian mountaineurs at the time, R.C. is unlikely to focus his narration on racial interaction.

...the discourse of denial in Lee Smith’s The Devil’s Dream
The medicine show, in which fake doctors sold 'medicine' to country folk, included music, comedy, and blackface minstrelsy and 'provided an early commercial outlet for country musicians, who were often employed by the traveling shows.' Cantwell mentions black banjo virtuosos who, after the end of slavery, utilized their new freedom of relative mobility and followed minstrel shows throughout the South. These shows accomplished three things: They attracted folk musicians from the remotest areas of the country; they disseminated an appropriated, or expropriated, form of black culture; and they provided a format for black musicians to present their musical craft to a growing number of listeners.

Smith picks up the thread of Nonnie Hulett's life in a later story told by another unnamed community narrator. This episode, in which Nonnie runs away from her husband and elopes with a medicine show, allows for references to minstrel entertainment that seek to establish historical accuracy and provide a colorful backdrop for Nonnie's adventures. Significantly, Nonnie's interest in entertainment and blackface comedy is regarded by the mountaineers as an act of treason, and the narrator, by framing and manipulating Nonnie's story, employs his or her narrative power to punish Nonnie for betraying her family. The tale warns others who might think about leaving the mountains: Nonnie perishes in a hotel fire, alone and alienated from her clan.

The unfiltered depiction of blackface minstrelsy - a 'blackface-nigger dancer' called Sambo caricatures black dancing and enacts the racial stereotypes of the day: Sambo speaks in an exaggerated black dialect, is clumsy, extremely lazy, childlike, overly sexualized, and generally the butt of the jokes supplied by other actors - obscures the dynamic at work in the show. By watching the presentation, Nonnie and the audience affirm their 'whiteness' and veil their culture's investment in 'blackness'. With no blacks present, the spectators can enjoy the spectacle and hide their fascination with things black: the blackface actor is white underneath the paint, and the songs and dances he performs are 'whitened' versions of 'black' cultural material. Berndt Ostendorf's assessment that '[i]n minstrelsy, American vernacular culture began to imitate, incorporate and acknowledge the black idiom and - anticipated on stage what many Americans deeply feared: the blackening of America' illustrates the difficulties of Appalachian mountaineers in coming to terms with the arrival of black culture in their home region: It is denied on the surface but addressed implicitly through minstrelsy's 'symbolic language and ... iconic iconography for "intermingling" culturally with the African Caliban while at the same time "isolating" him socially.'

The minstrel scene in The Devil's Dream is significant because it captures the inexpressible for Smith's characters. As musicians and isolated folk, the mountaineers interested in black expressive culture, but their restrictive self-codification disallows them from engaging in a conscious search for Otherness. Eric Lott has described this ambiguity, this fascination with, and simultaneous fear of, 'blackness'. Lott writes:

Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed - minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation. What Homi Bhabha would call its 'ambivalence' - and what my title loosely terms 'love and theft'. The very form of blackface acts - an investiture in black bodies - seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of 'blackness' and demonstrates the permeability of the color line.

Throughout The Devil's Dream, both Bhabha's 'ambivalence' and Lott's desire to try on the accents of 'blackness' appear. However, these qualities remain unexplored, residing almost totally below the surface of the narrative's discourse, or, as Lott phrases it, 'at the very edge of semantic availability'.

Nonnie's move out of the holler represents larger cultural shifts in which rural and mountain musicians set out for the cities, into recording studios, and onto the stage of the 'Grand Ole Opry' and other commercial theatres. These developments initiated a third wave of communication between white Appalachians and African American music during the 1920s. As soon as record companies discovered that the country sound of Southern music was marketable, they began to seek and record the music played by 'hillbilly' artists. What they found were segregated populations but integrated - in the form of musical crossovers - musical styles. The so-called 'race ' and 'hillbilly' records in the 1920s and 1930s, however, expressed the segregationist spirit of the times and relegated black performers to the 'race' category even if they played 'hillbilly' music, and white musicians to the 'hillbilly' label even if their repertoire consisted mainly of blues tunes. Malone's explanation, going beyond a simple reference to racism, rings true. While the archaism of southern folk music was one source of its appeal, he argues, 'its identification with a presumed racially homogenous culture was an additional attraction to those who saw America's own supposed racial purity disappearing in the years surrounding World War I. The southern mountains seemed to be one of the last remaining repositories of Anglo-Saxonism in the United States ...' Commenting on the 'particularly ethnic factor in the rise of American modernism', Heinz Eckstadt offers further possible reasons for the success of traditional old-time music in the 1920s and 1930s: The urge to close gates, to erect walls, to re-establish lines of separation ... came, however, not only from the effort to maintain racial purity, to preserve the United States as an (in origin and essence) Anglo-Saxon nation ... it was also ... a defense against the boundary-dissolving, fusing and confusing, merging and melting experience of modernity.'
'Hillbilly' music nonetheless continued to be produced under an African American influence (the blues, jazz, and ragtime people heard on the radio or on records) and with the participation of black musicians. A.P. Carter, the head of country music's most famous family, the Carters, and one of the historical figures on which Smith bases her novel - R.C. Bailey shares many traits with Carter; chapter titles such as 'This World Is Not My Home' are lines from songs made famous by the Carters - toured the mountains and other areas in the South on a quest for original songs and material with a black guitar player named Leslie Riddles. Even though the extent of Riddles's influence on the Carter sound is difficult to gauge, it is safe to assume that he did play a major role. While A.P. was writing down lyrics, Riddles learned the melodies and invented guitar parts he would later teach to Maybelle, A.P.'s wife. Many songs in the Carter repertoire - Wolfe mentions 'Sunshine in the Shadows' and 'Can't Feel At Home' - derive from the African American gospel tradition and were staples of Riddles's musical language. In fact, Nager adds, 'many of Maybelle's best-known arrangements, in a bass-picking format known universally as "Carter style", seem to have come directly from Riddle, including the guitar showpiece "Cannonball Blues"'.

In The Devil's Dream, however, R.C. is the presiding genius of the group. It was he who "worked up," as he called it, the songs, figuring out new arrangements for ... old classics ... it was he who found new songs for them to sing." Even though we have to be careful in reading the novel as a historical account of country music (it is a retelling and revisioning of it), it is still striking that the many similarities between the Carter family and the Bailes end when it comes to the interracial collaboration between A.P. and Riddles. What we have here is a central paradox in Appalachian social and musical adaptations to change. On the one hand, as Malone states, Appalachian musicians 'were sufficiently isolated and socially conservative to retain music traits long after they had ceased to be fashionable elsewhere', but on the other hand, and this explains why we find black songs and styles in early country music but hardly any accounts of black and white interaction in the testimonies of musicians, they were 'remarkably receptive to new and externally originated musical influences, and prone to change them to fit their own tastes and styles'.

The Devil's Dream includes a scene narrated by Alice Bailey in which her father, Durwood (R.C.'s brother), takes her and her sister up on a mountain, where R.C. has assembled a radio and where a large number of folks have gathered to listen to the Opry broadcast. When the so-called 'Harmonic Islander', whose playing recalls the quintessential blues motif of trains passing by, appears on the show, Alice recounts that 'someone on those trains up there on the bald said that the Harmonica Wizard was a nigger, but I don't know about that. I ain't never seen a nigger.'

The Harmonica Wizard's name was DeFord Bailey (no apparent connection to Smith's fictional family), an African American musician who had grown up with "black hillbilly music", the form of old-time country music that spread widely throughout Southern black communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charles Wolfe argues that "[i]t may seem curious that a radio audience ... did not recognize DeFord's blackness ... but DeFord seldom spoke on the air and confined his act largely to playing music." Wolfe also suggests that it may have been in Hay's interest to keep Bailey's blackness a secret.


64 Wolfe, liner notes.
65 Nager, p. 114.
66 The Devil's Dream, p. 104.
67 Wolfe, Neither Anglo-Saxon nor Celtic, p. 29.
68 The Devil's Dream, p. 122.
71 Nager, pp. 107-09.
72 Nager, p. 110.
73 The Devil's Dream, p. 115. In Oral History, the discourse of denial in Lee Smith's The Devil's Dream...
is striking, however, that ‘black’ and ‘white’ Southern musical styles at the time sounded so much alike that audiences could not tell the difference on the radio.

Alice has never seen ‘a nigger’, but she hears his music and is enthralled by its tone and quality. This again attests to the mountainmen’s desire for faraway places and events. Nonetheless, the older people in the community reject music played by blacks even if they have been influenced by it. Alice’s referral to Bailey as a ‘nigger’ indicates the power of the mountain discourse: processes of naming are equated with social power and control over others. Kimberly W. Benston has written about fictionalizations of African Americans that often result in an ‘insistence on mispraising the whitening of experience as a fulfillment of self while assigning all experience of blackness to namelessness’.

When the narrators in *The Devil’s Dream* say ‘niggers’, they are not just speaking the language of the day. Rather, as Benston maintains, “jollifying black people the brand of ‘nigger’ indicates a desire to void the possibility of meaning within the ‘blackened’ shell of selfhood, thereby reducing substance to a repetitive echo of a catachresis. ‘Nigger’ is a mechanism of control by contraction: it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential inability to see (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified ... ‘Nigger’ ... is a name for difference which serves the ideological function of imbuing ‘whiteness’ with a ‘sense’ it primordially lacks.”

What do we make of Smith’s portrayal of the Opry show in the distant mountains and of her choice of a narrator who, unlike others present in the scene, has never left the mountains and never seen a black person? Speaking at an unspecified point in time as an adult. Alice recreates the attitudes of the elders and her own ignorance of goings on outside of the mountain universe. Her recollection does not go beyond her youthful lack of knowledge, and the story of DeFord Bailey, who is a part of the multicultural roots of country music but who had to struggle in a segregated and racist society, remains untold.

In this episode, we see the problematic dimension of Smith’s fictional project and its relation to historical inquiry. *The Devil’s Dream* constitutes the author’s reimagining of Appalachian history, a process Klaus Ensslin has termed ‘amalgamating historical fact and fiction’. Like David Bradley, whose novel *The Chancyville Incident* (1981) Ensslin discusses, Smith uses ‘the oral tradition as a narrative vehicle’ to give an agency to her interpretation of Appalachian history. Smith’s invention of oral histories that retell historical events and are spoken by characters who are moulded around existing families downplays her authorial control over the text and its language and seeks to pass for a mere recording of the speakers’ subjective experience. *The Devil’s Dream*, if we follow Karleitzen Sterle, employs mechanisms in which ‘the verbal structure of the narration is veiled in order to make the passage from fiction to referential illusion as easy as possible [and] ... to disguise the effect of language at the origin of such illusion making’.

If we approach *The Devil’s Dream* as historians, which Smith seems to encourage by appending and explaining the sources she studied as background material for the novel (they appear after the frame narrative), the obvious omissions discussed earlier allow us to challenge Smith’s allocation of sources and her sacrificing of historical material for the telling of a particular story. Jerome Bruner argues that ‘[i]t is an act of constructing a narrative ... is considerably more than “selecting” events either from real life, from memory, or from fantasy and then placing them in an appropriate order’. The events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative.”

In *The Devil’s Dream*, then, to apply Bruner’s words, ‘[t]here seems indeed to be some sense in which narrative, rather than referring to “reality”, may in fact create or constitute it, as when “fiction” creates a “world” of its own ...’

If we take the oral history form of the novel at face value (in a willing suspension of disbelief that permits us to read the words of the speakers in the text as their words), more problems arise. As Grele reminds us, ‘the best story is not always the most historically useful’, and as readers of Smith’s historical fiction we are denied essential knowledge of the mountain discourse’s construction. Oral historians hold that in order to decipher an oral account, we must know as much as possible about the interviewer, interviewee, the relationship between the two, and the situation of the talk. ‘Since oral histories are joint creations [where] knowledge of the interviewer is as critical an evaluation of the source as knowledge of the interviewee.’ In *The Devil’s Dream*, however, we are denied access to these pieces of information: we do not know when the speakers speak (1992, the year the novel was published? At some specific point in the past?) or to whom they tell their stories (they address a person present at the telling, but is it Lee Smith, a fictional oral historian, a family member, or the reader?). These questions remain unanswered and thus pose a central problem for our understanding of the novel: By removing herself from the surface of the text, and by shrouding in mystery the modes of textual production that stand behind the work, Smith produces an illusion of seemingly independent and historically accurate speech acts uttered by her semi-historical narrators.

If we, finally, read *The Devil’s Dream* as Smith’s fictional vision of Appalachia, we could argue that the text says more about the Appalachian writer of the 1990s than about the place evoked by the actual narrative. The Southern author cannot escape the entanglements of race: as Morrison observes, the ‘fabrication of an Africanist persona’ - here in the form of the ‘niggers’ who appear frequently in the narrative - is reflexive, a ‘meditation on the self’ and ‘a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness’.

The subject, then, of Smith’s devil’s (i.e. troubled, haunting) dream is the...
Dreamer, the writer herself, and not merely the history of an area and its music. The truth of the storyteller, as Hurston tells us, is the dream itself: for Smith to become a truly Appalachian storyteller means to forget all those things she does not want to remember and to remember everything she does not want to forget.60

In the last quarter of The Devil's Dream, Smith introduces two additional characters: rockabilly singer Johnny Raines (based loosely on Johnny Cash) and Katie Cocker (with parallels to Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn). Touring the South in the 1950s - the post-war era is the fourth stage of cross-racial musical interaction - Johnny performs material he has learned from 'a huge black man named Rufus Main who played nigger blues on the guitar, with a lot of string pushing and choking...'. Johnny had met Rufus in the army, and the black guitarist taught him all his licks and runs, real patient, niggers always act like they've got all the time in the world, which is one thing Johnny likes about them, he hates hyper little white dudes like the kind that run everything in this fucking country. He'll take a big slow nigger anytime.67

Johnny's statements indicate the importance of African Americans in definitions of Southernness. He claims rights over his privileged understanding of 'blackness' while his self-definition and musical craft depend on the existence of the 'big slow nigger', who seems somehow more 'authentically' Southern and country than the white man who represents the urban music industry.88

Country star Katie Cocker concludes The Devil's Dream's narration by detailing the many changes in her career. Although Katie's words provide a compelling critique of the sexism and commercialism in the country industry, her narrative does not extend this criticism to the racism that accompanies and intersects with discriminatory gender roles and exploitative capitalist practices. Katie wants to 'keep it country', claiming that '[t]he Sixties didn't happen to everybody... They didn't happen to me.'69 The Sixties, a decade associated by Katie mainly with radical feminism, unpatriotic liberalism, and the disappearance of regional identities, is also the decade of the Civil Rights movement, the Civil Rights and Voting Acts, the struggle for racial integration throughout the South, and a new black consciousness expressed in music: Motown pop, Stax soul, free jazz, and the R&B/country crossover released on King Records.70 Thus, by insisting that the Sixties didn't happen to her, Katie Cocker denies that the social and political changes that have taken place around the country - including the church bombing in Alabama that inspired John Coltrane's 'Alabama' and the embattled integration of schools that incited Louis Armstrong to denounce Eisenhower in 1957 and motivated Charles Mingus to write 'Tales of Fable'71 - had any effect on her, her music, and the self-understanding of her home region.

The workings of denial become obvious when we look at the number of black characters who saturate Katie's account. Most of them are ser-

vant or babysitters, but Roberta Boyd, the last African American mentioned, sings beautifully during a church service and later hugs Katie, making her realize 'how needy [of physical and emotional affection] I was.72 As a conclusion as this scene is, symbolically unifying the white and black Southern women, it does not break with the stereotypical presentation of African Americans: as a soulful singer and maudlin-like provider of love, Roberta is part of a long history of debasing popular images of black women.

Conclusion

In his groundbreaking work on country music history, Country Music, USA, Bill C. Malone wrote:

Of all the southern ethnic groups, none has played a more important role in providing songs and styles for the white country musician than that forced migrant from Africa, the black. Nowhere is the peculiar love-hate relationship that has prevailed among the southern races more evidenced than in country music. Country music - seemingly the most 'pure white' of all American musical forms - has borrowed heavily from the black. White Southerners who would be horrified at the idea of mixing socially with blacks have nonetheless enthusiastically accepted their musical offerings: the spirituals, the blues, ragtime, jazz, rhythm-and-blues, and a whole host of dance steps, vocal shadings, and instrumental techniques.91

In the case of Smith's Appalachian mountaineers, the borrowings from black musicians often occurred indirectly - through instruments like the banjo and the guitar, through minstrelsy, through song material written or played by black travelling musicians, and over the radio and records - but on occasion, musical crossovers were created through direct interaction, as DeFord Bailey's prominence on the Opry cast and Leslie Riddle's collaboration with A.P. Carter demonstrate. Smith's storytellers, however, deny these influences, and they cling to their deep racial identity until the very end of the novel.

In the narrative present, the 1970s, Katie decides to record an album of old family songs with the help of four generations of Bailey family members. Her claim that 'I know where we're from. I know who we are,' leaves us wondering if her desire to record the past and her 'authentic' family roots does not oversimplify the complexity of her musical and familial origins.94 David Sanjek suggests a valuable approach to the question of cultural and historical authenticity when he reminds us to 'recognize that all transcendent realms of authenticity are fictions and that any given cultural identity will retain a mixed, relational dimension.95

Smith appears to acknowledge this point at least partially. The Bailey genealogy contains 'non-white' blood (Jake Toney), and the climate that fostered folk music is not a nostalgic one: life is hard work, women are raped by their husbands, child death is common, and social
In her analysis of Caryl Phillips' *Poetry on the Place of the Question* and *Maddaddam*, Dottis makes a similarly crucial point about the influence of African American literature on her work. She writes: "In the novel *The Devil's Dream*,..." (p. 156).