

The Ethics of Locality: Reconsiderations of Life and Language in Lee Smith's *Oral History*

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In *Oral History* (1983), Lee Smith combines various styles of texts to make a novel. Local people's personal narratives, objective third-person descriptions, and a young intellectual's journals—these texts offer various viewpoints to suggest the subversive power of Appalachian mountain dwellers' lives in Virginia¹. The characters' rich voices are formed as a result of Smith's long recordings of the Appalachian local people's tales, though in these processes Smith feels her own paradoxical position as a writer. In an interview, Smith confesses that before she wrote *Oral History* she had been suffering with the feeling that no matter how much she tried to record the speakers' voices, her written record lost their "vitality" (Tate 6). For Smith, *Oral History* is not the simple record of the past, but a re-composed self-critical text dedicated to local people's vital narratives.

This novel's ethical approach comes from the author's interactive explorations of local life. Various perspectives are juxtaposed to reflect each other to make readers critically reexamine the region's long-term historical processes. They reveal that the Appalachian local region is not the place of pastoral beauty, but the place where severe demolitions of humanity and nature have gone hand-in-hand. In an interview, Smith says:

In *Oral History* I was particularly concerned with land, what happened to the land. People from outside came in and first they took the lumber and then bought up the mineral rights and stripped

it for coal . . . The land was really raped. And not for the benefit of the people who lived there. . . . So *Oral History* really is a lament, or even more of a wail over what has happened to the land and even more what has happened to the people. It is very sad. (Tate 97)

The changes of the Appalachian landscape and the domestic tragedies of the local people are interconnected. The local people's ways of life, which include their attitudes to their region's landscape, communities, and personal sexuality, are neglected and buried in the process of economic development.

This work's unique attitude appears in its controversial title. Technically, readers can see how the narrators' voices perform in the texts, but they cannot actually hear the narrators' *oral* sounds. If it is impossible to catch the living voices' nuances from the written texts, what kind of contents does this novel's title suggest? In what way are people's voices, especially the early twentieth century's Appalachian mountain region's illiterate people's voices, restored in texts? What is the main issue in this novel?

To focus on this question, Yi-Fu Tuan's argument on language gives a good theoretical framework. According to Tuan, in western intellectual tradition, localized people's temporal experiences are considered to be the secondary sources for metaphysical consideration. The objects of serious consideration should be the uncorrupted written words, not the contemporary people's false speeches. For example, Martin Heidegger argues that a careful study of the roots of language, which is traced back to Greek words, can reveal the truly ethical meaning of a human's way of life: the perpetual language indicates ideal developments of individuals and communities, and offers the ideal connection for people and homeland.² However, in contrast to Heidegger's metaphysical analysis on being, Tuan's *Morality and Imagination* suggests that more attention should be given to people's ordinary speech acts in order to consider the total existences of the common people. Tuan argues:

The acts and conditions to which the words refer are of course a

common part of human experience everywhere. They are suppressed in high culture out of deference to good taste. We have seen how people, in rebellion against the elaborate verbal edifice, seek truth and moral insight in a simpler and more direct language.” (68)

Tuan furthermore argues that scholars have neglected people’s “cuss and foul words,” because “a narrow moralism censors them from ordinary speech” (68).

Many critics have studied *Oral History* from feminist perspectives,³ but Tuan’s argument sheds a fresh light on this novel’s linguistic specifics. From Tuan’s point of view, it is possible to say that what Smith tries to recover in this novel are not the words of “high culture” and “good taste,” but the people’s everyday words, which include direct words that reveal the local people’s reality. Smith’s *Oral History* focuses on the informal linguistic expressions, so that such history can include the local people’s matters.

As this novel’s purpose is the total exploration of local lives, the formal language cannot keep its safe position. Some of the novel’s chapters are depicted from highly educated characters’ point of views, but these chapters suggest that the cultivated words never mitigate the verbal violence embedded in the domestic area and the disgraceful acts witnessed more directly in the local communities. The moralistic advantage of intelligence based on the contrasted categories such as high culture/primitive culture, or polite words/impolite words, is uncomfortably undermined to show the Appalachian mountain region’s crude vitality.

The contrast between sophisticated urban culture and primitive local activity is shown in the beginning of the frame narrative of this novel. Jennifer Bingham, a descendent of the Cantrell family, comes to Hoot Owl Holler to gather material to write her college’s Oral History course’s report. She is a beautiful urban undergrad who visits her mother’s rural hometown, expecting to tape-record some interesting “haunted”⁴ sounds in her mother’s deserted house.

Jennifer's attitude to her mother's family's folk culture is strongly prescribed in her education. What her instructor wants to hear in the local haunted house is the sound of "the rocking chair, the terrible banging noises and rushing winds and ghostly laughter" that begins "every day at sundown," and he expect it can be recorded as an interesting "new knowledge" (*OH* 9). As this knowledge does not need any direct communication with rural life, Jennifer will not hear the family's communal tales, which include the local people's sexual and violent histories.

At the end of this novel, this frame narrative appears again to tell readers that Jennifer will make an A with her report for the course, and will marry her Oral History class teacher. This last episode suggests to readers that her simple preconception on the rural life fails to come up with the local people's indigenous connections with the complex history of the land. As she cannot accept the fact that the pastoral is the very place of people's undressed desires, Jennifer does not have the words to narrate her regional origin in detail. One of the last episodes is symbolical. Jennifer meets her mother's family for the first time and spends a very short time with them, but one of her relatives, Almarine, who is named after the family's founder of Hoot Owl Holler, suddenly French kisses her, suggesting the amoral sexual drive of the Cantrell family. Jennifer is deeply shocked by her elder relative's physical harassment, but "by the time she gets back to the college," she "has changed it all around in her head," and she considers "Al is nothing but a big old bully, a joker, after all" (*OH* 339). She categorizes her mother-side family as the "really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts--it's other side of the pastoral coin" (*OH* 339). Her words and ideas will not shed any light on her own shadowy components. Instead, the Cantrell family's real past needs to be told in this novel's main four-part texts in various styles, to prove that they are not the "early tribe," nor "primitive," but the people who still demand vivid

words to express their own histories.

The main body of this novel has four parts. The first part, Part One, is divided into four chapters, and the first and longest narrative is told by a village midwife, Granny Younger, who lives on the south side of Hurricane Mountain. She mainly narrates how Almarine Cantrell, the Cantrell family land's main founder, marries Pricey Jane, after his dangerous love affair with the passionate woman, Red Emmy. Granny's simple words are powerfully influential, and she believes her words have prophetic power. Granny advises Almarine to marry someone, and Almarine immediately begins to court various women. It seems that his fate is not determined by his own will, but is strongly guided by Granny's words. Not having his own sense of morals, Almarine follows Granny's indications. Granny proudly recollects what he did and comments: "Almarine went right out and done it, what I said. Everbody does what I say" (*OH* 29). Still, as a critic has already pointed out, Granny's statement "colludes with" the community's patriarchal values (Byrd 121). What she can predict is the reflection of what the conventional morality wants community members to do. First, giving no respect to the community's consuetude, Almarine seriously falls in love with Red Emmy, who is a "strong, independent, and sexually free" mountain woman (Entizminger 161). As Emmy's passion ominously threatens the community's mores, Granny presumes that Almarine is "bewitched" by Red Emmy, and advises him to throw Red Emmy out of his house (*OH* 50). Almarine follows Granny's instructions, and finally chooses Pricey Jane as his wife, which is safely approved by Granny. In fact, Almarine is "bewitched" by the community's morals that Granny represents, but Granny blamed Red Emmy for every evil event in Almarine's life. Granny's session reveals that the local people, including women, basically support the community's dogmas, and such conventional values strongly control people's sense of landscape, belonging, and sexuality. At the end of Part One, Granny locates Red Emmy and her

residence, Snowman Mountain, as a cursed place and isolates them from the community with her patriarchal, simple words.

In contrast, this novel's Part Two introduces an urban outsider's point of view. In this chapter, an intellectual young man, Richard Burlage, enters into this Appalachian mountain region area and stays there for "five months" in 1923 (*OH* 190). He is a genteel teacher who comes from Richmond, and his journal tells readers that he is defeated in his love relationship with Almarine's beautiful daughter, Dory, and finally returns to Richmond, without knowing that he is leaving Dory with his twin girls in her womb. As Martha Billips notes, his intellectual superiority and sophisticated narrative makes Burlage as a "consummate outsider" (*OH* 36). He recognizes that Appalachian mountain region is a truly strange land for him, but he imposes his romantic idea on the regional people to secure his own advantageous position in the local community, and he keeps his intellectual detachment even in his sexual relationship with Dory. His polite words cannot change the local reality, because he just exploits and consumes its beauty. Burlage does not accept the mountain region's realities, moonshining works and the local people's controversial characters, and he finally retreats to his urban area.

In one of the chapters of Part Three, Burlage returns to this local area as a photographer in 1934. He believes that "a photograph can illuminate and enlarge one's vision rather than limit it" (*OH* 264). Ironically, his photograph expands his vision to realize that the coal mining and lumber companies' environmental exploitations have dramatically proceeded to demolish the landscape, but Burlage's conversation with local people proves his words are still impotent to negotiate with local reality. Even when he confronts a coal miner and the coal miner asks if Burlage wants "to hear some more," Burlage just replies, "I have to be on my way" and rejects having a long and interactive communication with him (*OH* 268).

Part Four is told by one of Dory's daughters, Sally, and this chapter

shows that the community and local mores still strongly oppress women. Sally does not go to school when she is a child, and helps her stepmother, Ora Mae, at home. But Sally, who has her energetic “[p]iss and vinegar” (*OH* 322), tries to escape from this situation, runs off to Florida with a “disc jockey” (*OH* 307). She again escapes from the disc jockey, marries another man, divorces him, and comes back to Black Rock Mountain in Virginia. She finally marries Roy. Sally, who knows well the outside world, realistically sees what is actually happening in her hometown.

In Sally's narrative, it seems that Cantrell people foolishly localize modern capitalism's methods. Pearl, Sally's sister and a teacher, has a serious love affair with her student, but it seems to be a reverse relationship of Burlage and Dory. Ora Mae's son, modern Almarine, sees his environment as a natural resource in the same way as the coal mining and the timber companies did. Still, some new developments of the community are suggested. In the last scene of Book Four, Sally and Roy exchange an intimate conversation to overview the Cantrell family's tragicomic story. The couple's sexuality is harmoniously composed for the first time in this novel, and their words suggest that they still have the future to survive.

It is possible for readers to foresee this area's development in a little brighter tone than the past. As the end of this novel suggests, in the future, Al will make an entertainment park named “Ghostland” in Hoot Owl Holler, like a Disneyland, and it may be one of the local people's aggressive negotiations with their landscape and outside consumers. He also uses the AmWay method to build up his own community. His entrepreneurial spirit may seem snobbish, but it proves that the local people's words and deeds are still developing, and the Cantrells still recompose their landscapes, communities, and sexual relationships with laughter and curses. As Sally says, “It's not over yet” (*OH* 331). The new ethics of local life becomes more realistic, when Sally's words include neglected local memories. As Roy

suggests, such memories are more enjoyable, or “better than TV” (*OH* 278). Reexaminations and reconsiderations of people’s neglected words are ways to gain a more integrated view of people’s life in today’s world.

Notes

¹ Martha Billips proves that this novel places the Cantrell family’s homeland, Hoot Owl Holler, in Virginia State. See Billips 262-7.

² Tuan 67. See also “Building Dwelling Thinking” (Heidegger 145-61).

³ Recent critics who study *Oral History* have not much focused on the ethical problems of people’s violent and foul words so far. In one of the most recent studies, Billips analyzes this novel using Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural “hybridity,” and highly approve some minor intellectual characters that accept “the complexity of the people in Virginia hills” (43). Billips mainly focuses on the first half part of this novel, especially on Part One and Part Two, which include the period of the turn of the twentieth century to the middle of the 1920s, focusing on “the possibility of real cultural accommodation and potential hybridization in early twentieth-century Appalachian Virginia” (43). Still, the importance of Part Three and Part Four is not much stressed in Billips’s article.

Critics other than Billips have analyzed Smith’s work mainly in feminist theory’s framework. In almost all cases they focus on the female characters around the beginning of the twentieth century. Betina Entzminger analyzes the archetypically isolated woman, Red Emmy, as a woman who “has the traditional attributes of the femme fatale” (162). The idea of the cursed, haunted women in community are also applied in Margaret Donovan Bauer’s argument. Focusing on the women’s restricted conditions, Dorothy Combs Hill argues that *Oral History* is Smith’s turning-point work, which makes her characters way out of “social constraints and patriarchal imagination” (199). In regard to the community, Paula Gallant Eckard argues that *Oral History* reveals “the importance of individual voices in revealing the past” (122). Eckard claims that “the past is indeed the source of racial, cultural, and familial legacies that for better or worse influence who we are and what we will become” (134), suggesting the voices are always the battleground of the controversial powers. Linda Byrd insists that Lee Smith’s *Oral History* sheds light on the criticism on modern motherhood, which still maintains the cultural gap between the image of mother and the sexually desiring woman. Byrd argues, ending her novel with the sexually bold voice of Sally, Smith resists the patriarchal hegemony, in order to insist the survival and even proliferation of the sexual mother (141-42). Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon argues that *Oral History* problematizes story listening in racially separate

Southern conditions. She insists that hearing the storyteller's voice and listener's response in this novel rewrites the conventional reading of the fiction to position the complexity of the race problem in a cultural dynamic. Corrine Dale emphasizes the multiple narrators in *Oral History*, from Julia Kristeva's termed "semiotic" point of view, and argues that the characters who are most alienated in Smith's novels are those who depend on written languages and thus are most limited by figurative symbolic language, the patriarchal discourse. She argues that "the Cantrell curse . . . is based on the repudiation of female sexuality" (194). Still, Dale concludes that, with limitless passion, Sally finally can give "the genuine feeling and authentic language" at last.

These feminist arguments offer subtle analysis of female voices and the local women's oppressed situations, but in many cases these feminists' analyses do not give enough consideration to why the Journals of Richard Burlage, an intellectual outsider's written records, are settled in the center of this novel, nor give much attention on the short frame narratives that wrap up this whole novel.

⁴ Smith, *Oral History* (New York: Berkley, 2011) 6. Page references for all further quotations from this work will be cited as *OH* with page numbers in parentheses.

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