Lillian Smith's Strange Fruit: An Examination of the Alterical Dimensions, Racial Consciousness, and Silence of the Southern Woman

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*: An Examination of The Alterrval Dimensions, Racial Consciousness, and Silence of the Southern Woman

by

Syrena Bothe

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Masters of Arts January 2006

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Abstract

In the 1944 publication of *Strange Fruit*, Lillian Smith attempts to identify the contradictions between external racial hierarchy, social class, and female whiteness by identifying them first as internal struggles that affected a southerner’s external existence. This is, instead, mis-read as a catastrophic love story between a white boy, Tracy Deen, and a black girl, Non Anderson.

However, this struggle of racial consciousness is a motif and driving force that heavily weights the intentions and choices of both white and black people in *Strange Fruit*. It is breath and instinct that lives in each southern inhabitant, it is the air of stagnancy and resistance to change in the name of tradition. It is the south. It is the people who identify with the south.

The idea of interracial couple and interracial community in the novel is used by Smith to bring the sexual, gender based, social and racial oppression of characters that are in direct contact with Tracy and Non, into consciousness but never into voice. Each character, suffers in stagnant silence, unable to move away from town or within the town. They are trapped inside boundaries—the expectations and rules—that have existed long before them. This novel should be read as a socio-gender-racial catastrophe for the characters involved rather than as the love story that first caught the attention of 1940’s audience, with Smiths memoir serving as a point of reference.

Although *Strange Fruit* has remained unnoticed as a place for extensive literary criticism and discourse, after employing Hortense Spillers discussion of Tzetan Todorov’s three dimensions of alterity from “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor,” to expose the layers of racial consciousness of Smith’s characters who are
held stagnant by the dominant patriarchy of the south, the split of human morality and racial consciousness is a literary tradition located in works of black and white American women writers, from Kate Chopin and Lillian Smith to Nora Neal Hurston, Gayle Jones, and Toni Morrison, the struggle to racially aware, self sustaining, and socially conscious is an American Literary feminist tradition. It is from this space that I ask the reader to enter.
LILLIAN SMITH'S STRANGE FRUIT: AN EXAMINATION OF
THE ALTERICAL DIMENSIONS, RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS,
AND SILENCE OF THE SOUTHERN WOMAN

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SYRENA BOTHE

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Lillian Smith was born in Jasper Florida in December 1897 to a wealthy, large, southern family. The Smith family later moved to Georgia, where Smith lived and worked until her death in 1966. It is in Georgia where her most vivid childhood memories of the south are created. Smith’s experiences with her family’s traditional, southern contradictory values and politics serve as the catalyst for Smith’s commentaries on race, in her 1949 memoir Killers of the Dream and 1944 novel, Strange Fruit. Unfortunately, while Smith’s work as a political activist is historically documented, there is virtually no literary criticism on the Killers of the Dream or Strange Fruit.

In Strange Fruit Smith contradicts the internal beliefs of each character with their exterior surroundings and the social politics of their environment. The space where the morals of each character split recognizes the individual level but never leaves the space of the individual. The divisions of each character are many: gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Smith’s novel initially rose to popularity as a “romance novel” narrating the journey of an interracial and seemingly star-crossed couple, Tracy Deen and Non Anderson. After reaching bestseller status as a love story, it was produced on Broadway, with Smith at the helm of its transition from novel to stage. However, it was later banned in the north for the use of the word “nigger” and later banned in the south for its portrayal of southerners. There is no record of Smith’s reaction to the reception of Strange Fruit. However, the novel’s alignment with Smith’s memoir, Killers of the Dream, written five years later, obviates the parallels of Smith’s experiences as a child in racially volatile Georgia between the two texts.
For example, in both *Killers of the Dream* and *Strange Fruit* the side of town where black people lived is always referred to as colored town. The neighborhood where the white people inhabited is called white town. Although, in *Strange Fruit*, white town is Maxwell, “colored town” remains the same. However, Maxwell becomes metonymous with segregation as evident in *Killers of the Dream*, where Smith locates the little southern town in her memory.

A little white town rimmed with Negroes, making a deep shadow on the whiteness. There it lies, broken in two by one strange idea. Minds broken. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split in a thousand pieces. That is segregation (39).

Segregation, an idea, a system of beliefs so powerful that it re-names everything in its path white or not white—colored. In Smith’s memoir, unlike her novel, she names the towns only to reference the skin color of the inhabitants. No one would be equal in the eyes of God. No one would be equal financially, it is a judgment left to the traditional demographic stratification of skin color. In *Killers of the Dream*, Smith points out the tradition of town labeling through the stories of her youth. However, she never names the problem, instead, she leaves it, as an unspoken contradiction, for the audience to find as opposed to the novel where there is Maxwell and colored town. Two towns looking at each other through the frames of town lines, harmless manmade divisions of earth, dangerous man made stratifications of skin color.

Another example is with the author herself. Smith is paradigmatic of white female characters in the novel as she, wealthy southern white woman, born, raised, educated in and emotionally bound to the south. Tragically, as much as Smith is Socially enlightened,
lesbian, activist, writer, never dis-identify’s herself geographically from the south. She remains, always observing from the frame of her little southern town.

**Killers of the Dream** follows the journey of Smith’s coming into racialized consciousness from child to adult activist and writer, as a white, southern woman connected to the South and haunted by it. Smith discusses the numerous separations she and all white southern children were forced “untangle” the threads race, politics, money, religion, and sex into separated meanings and social places, that should never intersect and yet, together weave the memories and consciousness of southern children.

Before and after the success of *Strange Fruit*, Smith’s tireless awareness of the racial climate in the south and the injustices that the black community suffer at the hands of segregation and white supremacy kept Smith politically active. Smith supported many anti-lynching associations in the south and fought for desegregation. *Strange Fruit*, although seemingly a story about a young interracial couple, Non Anderson and Tracy Deen, the violent repercussions of family and town chaos surrounding the end of this relationship culminates in the lynching of an innocent black man, Henry, causing the novel to serve as a staunch cautionary tale and call for change to the collective community of the white south.

As much as Non Anderson and Tracy Deen appear to be another set of star crossed lovers, the space they occupy is one of hate and resistance to change. It is a space filled with memories of run down shacks and cabins in back yards. Of white men buying black women and selling families, denying children, demonizing black women, deifying white women and degrading black men to the point of powerlessness. *Strange Fruit* reveals the product of this southern history as well as the difficulty the south has to
release this tradition. While the novel was well received, it’s message of any stark picture of the southern relationship politics that went unnoticed in Strange Fruit were explicitly brought in to the readers consciousness in 1949 with Smith’s memoir.

*Killers of the Dream* is Smith’s observations on being raised as a white, female child in the South. At the beginning of the twentieth century, slavery is not a distant memory. The politics of slavery, the social grappling of Jim Crow, and the white south adjusting to emancipation, is a continual struggle for white southerners. This struggle became particularly difficult as traditional, social supremacist, elitist southerners tried to teach their children the same “values” that they learned as children. According to Smith, virtually no southern family missed a lesson.

Part of the value system is the importance of “tradition.” In her memoir, Smith often refers to the traditions she learned as ”southern traditions,” which point mainly to a financial social order, Christianity, Victorian rooted compulsory heterosexuality, and racial politics. Children of the south are not expected to know which politic they are dealing with or when to split one politic from another. However, when blatant contradictions surface that challenge the socio-racial order dictating the ideologies of human whiteness and sub human blackness, it is best to err on the side of Southern tradition than the Christian ethic that god loves everyone equally. Smith articulates the effect of racial politics on children, particularly Smith and her siblings, as southern racism is perpetrated in the home, as unquestionable doctrine and lessons of social decorum and morality.

A southern child’s basic lessons were woven of such dissonant strands...sometimes the threads tangled into a terrifying mess[...]. The mother
who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their “place.” The father who rebukes me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that ‘all men are brothers,’ trained me in the steel-rigid decorum’s I must demand of every colored male. They, who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my ‘soul,’ taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition.

Smith reflects that the ‘lessons’ she and all white southern children learn, “nudge the slave in us, telling it to obey what we do not believe in”(172). Smith suggests that children all begin life as slaves; white children learn white values beneath their white patriarch’s mastery of social rules. While Smith cannot say what black children learn, she observes “the warped, distorted frame we put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame but each is pinioned there”(39).

Is this the only time in a Southerners life when otherness is questioned? Does it only come from the innocence of childhood? This issue becomes more complex, as Smith explains the relationship between southern white child and the Mammy. Here, the white, southern child experiences care and nurturing through a relationship with a black woman. Smith states,

I knew that my old nurse who had cared for me through long months of illness, who had given me refuge when a little sister took my place as baby in the family […] was not worthy of the passionate love I felt for her but must be given instead a half-smiled-at affection similar to that which one feels for one’s dog (29).
Striking contradictions emerge between human emotion and southern tradition. Traditions that teach hatred and otherness to children put a quick end to the innocent humanity, making this value nearly impossible for the southern child to carry into adulthood as anything except more conflict.

Smith goes on to suggest that never, neither as child nor adult, should white southerners question the separation of moral strands. To do this, would unravel the agenda of her parents, which is to raise southern children who must reflect the south’s proper values of Christianity, heterosexuality, and the socio-spatial hierarchy of whiteness to blackness regardless of how contradictory the lessons. The spaces where these ideas or “lessons” contradict are the “splits.” It is within these moments of moral division that Smith explores the extent of the southern consciousness within each character in Strange Fruit. In the novel Strange Fruit, Lillian Smith gives voice to the contradiction of human morality and racial conflict as the “split.” Smith names it, identifying it as the places where human morality customarily weaves in and out of various human concepts and recognizes the conflict of space on an internal human level.

Section I: The Interracial Couple

In the novel, Strange Fruit, Non Anderson’s and Tracy Deen’s interracial relationship leads to racial chaos and irreparable damage. Strange Fruit demands exploration in an effort to locate the space of black and white male and female characters, their mobility, and the politics of their codes of silence. Non Anderson and Tracy Deen are models for the collision of racial politics and the effects of segregation and dehumanization of the black community, particularly black women, in the south. Todorov’s dimensions of alterity as discussed by Hortense J. Spillers serves as clear entry...
into this text by closely examining the relationships between the characters and town geography that cause a collision of racial and gender stratification, due to the lack of literary criticism on the novel. Finally, I plan to interrogate the interracial couple in *Strange Fruit* as a model that is located in the texts of black and white American women writers.

In *Strange Fruit* Lillian Smith maintains a series of constants. There is the interracial couple: white man- light skinned black woman, silence and whispering, and there is limited mobility for all inhabitants who choose to fall victim to the traditions of the south. Tracy Deen and Non Anderson are not alone; their child grows quietly in the backdrop of southern turmoil.

In the essay, "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor," Hortense Spillers discusses Tzetzan Todorov’s *Conquest of America*, emphasizing Todorov’s three dimensions of alterity. A closer reading of *Strange Fruit*, through this lens, serves as a cautionary tale of danger and stagnancy in the emancipated but socially silenced south. Todorov’s dimensions locate the racial conflict and torment of Smith’s characters in *Strange Fruit*. It is through this lens that alterity aligns the conflicts of the black and white female characters and the black male characters in the novel. Just as a scientist observes through a microscope, and an astronomer uses a telescope to see detail, Todorov’s theory details the conflict of silent internal struggle and violent external struggle. Spiller clearly outlines each of Todorov’s dimensions,

The axiological level—‘the other is good or bad, I love or do not love him, or ...he is my equal or my inferior (for there is no question that I am good and that I esteem myself’); (2) the praxeological level—the placing of distance or proximity
between oneself and an imagined other—‘I embrace the other’s values, I identify myself with him; or else I identify the other with myself, I impose my own image upon him; between submission to the other and the other’s submission, there is also a third term which is neutrality, or indifference’; (3) the epistemic level—‘I know or am ignorant of the other’s identity...of course there is no absolute here, but and endless gradation between the lower of higher states of knowledge’(305).

Smith’s novel, from the beginning is filled with what I think of as “deliberate vacancies” or points of silence in the text. The beginning of the novel is ambiguous. Smith does not allow the reader to stay in one place for too long. There is movement between characters, neighbors, and race, between the past and the present. This motion creates a silent chaos. There is whispering and secrecy; there is memory, which reflects an inner consciousness. The characters move between what they say to themselves and what they cannot say to others.

The first form of mobility is language. There is whispering and silence, there is code switching between characters. There is an idea that a true voice, filled with mobility, cannot exist outside of the mind. In the article, “The Language of Sexuality and Silence in Lillian Smith’s Strange Fruit.” Cheryl L. Johnson addresses the disruptions that serve as the racial commentaries that Smith poses in the novel, the internal language of the inhabitants of Maxwell, and codes of sexuality present in the novel.

In Strange Fruit the characters depend on the confidence of inner monologue. Everything is internalized. Nothing is said aloud. This directly reflects the tension of racism in the south as well as the general tension of racism that those who are discriminated against face regularly. In reference to the inhabitants of Maxwell, In
Strange Fruit there is physical mobility and vocal mobility—the extent to which the character raises his or her voice. In Maxwell, to be both physically and vocally mobile is catastrophic. This points out that Smith exemplifies many circumstances in which, The psychological horror racism imposes on blacks by revealing their private language—that is, their individual thoughts and/or language spoken among them about surviving Southern racism. For example, the reader is tourist to Bess, Non’s sisters’, double consciousness:

Black people...white people...black...white...it could drive you crazy—if you let it...Nonnie always smiled and called her a ‘race’ woman when she tried to tell of this flux of feeling, this shifting rage and pride and despair that swirled and backwashed around her (7).

Bess’s silence exists in what she cannot say to her sister. Her consciousness is two fold, as she is conflicted between her sister’s actions and the challenges she faces as a black woman working in a white town. Bess understands the need for silence, for codes that protect her. What seems to tear her apart is the idea that she cannot help her sister understand the importance of such codes. Bess’s struggle is internal because she can never fully articulate the “flux of feeling.” Bess suffers in silence while Non assumes that her sister, as a “race woman,” puts too much emphasis on race.

The exchange between Bess and Non occurs only in the space of Bess’s memory. Even in that memory, Bess remembers the difficulty she had explaining how she felt to her sister. Therefore, Bess never articulates her opinions on race outwardly within the present action of the novel; it is internalized and committed to memory. This is indicative of the silence that Bess feels must be protected as carefully as color. As Smith creates this
memory for Bess and the interaction with her sister, the moment is not even articulated within the space of White writer and black character. Smith polices the silence between the races as she writes. Silence is policed again in moments between Tracy and Non.

According to Spillers discussion of Todorov, in this instance Bess experiences the axiological dimension of alterity in which, “the other is good or bad, I love or do not love him, or ...he is my equal or my inferior (for there is no question that I am good and that I esteem myself”). Bess recognizes herself, as a black woman, as better than the white people around her. To be a “race woman” acknowledges that Bess is aware of the staunch opinions around her, blindly equating white with good and black with bad. Bess recognizes white as other and makes a conscious personal assertion to approach white people cautiously, noting their potential danger. Bess experiences waves of “rage” against the other commingled with feelings of “pride” when she compares herself over the other. Unfortunately, these moments of consciousness end in washes of “despair” as Bess, feels powerless to the dominant white other rendering her moral superiority, correct and of value but powerless against the white majority.

The silence between races and the need to maintain a separate language creates a compromising method of communication between Tracy Deen and Non. Here, as an interracial couple, they both challenge the codes of silence and private languages that each of their races maintain. In instances between Tracy and Non there is always whispering. The silence of the black private language melds with the outspoken voice of white privilege to create a couple that only whispers. Tracy moves from a voice that reflects his status, race, gender, and freedom to a conflicted whisper of being with a black woman. Meanwhile, Non moves from an extremely internal and privatized voice up to a
whisper when she is with Tracy. For example, in the first meeting of Tracy and Non as adults, Smith points out with the use of “whisper” that the exchange is hushed and intimate.

He opened the gate, came inside. Slim and white she stood there before him in the dusk. He pulled her behind a spirea bush. “I’m too hot to touch you,” he whispered. “Sweet and cool...always sweet and cool...you smell so good to me, Non,” he said unhappily.

“I’m glad.”

“All right. Tell me quick. What’s happened?”

She looked up at him steadily. “I’m pregnant, Tracy.”

She felt his hands tremble on her arm. “And I’m glad,” she whispered (4).

This exchange, between Tracy and Non, creates the motif for the silent tones they will share throughout the novel. Perhaps Smith sets up their first interactions as whispers, as Non divulges that she is pregnant, in order to directly reflect the lack of voice that the conception of their child represents in the socio historic period of the novel. While Non is not raped, Tracy Deen violates her, he objectifies her. He commodifies her. Non and Tracy’s whispering harkens back to the values of the communities in which they live that dictate how black women are treated and what makes a white man. Their child exists, silently, in a space between this turmoil, reflecting the unspoken. Much in the way that the black woman’s body, in the novel, is a place of mobility for the white man. Non believes that she gave herself to Tracy. However, as Johnson observes,

Smith constructed a black woman whose body and voice are closer to images of the “ideal” white woman: beautiful, kind, compassionate, and loving. For Smith,
Non simply happens to be black. Smith does not imply that Non is in any way ashamed of her blackness, nor is she an honorary white woman. For both Non and Smith, however, race does not seem to matter. Non states, “race is something made up, to me. Not real. I don’t—have to believe in it” (11).

Smith attempts to present Non as a nonracialized subject but it cannot be denied that her race is the catalyst for Tracy’s inner conflict. Non’s race, even if Smith only designates it by locating her in “Colored Town,” is affirmed with Tracy’s sexual mobility. He, as a white man, is in sexualized motion as many white men before him. He is attracted to the exoticized other.

Tracy confirms their racial differences by using Non body as a place of sexual exploration. As a pursuit, Non’s body is an escape from the idolatry that he is expected to give to white women, particularly Dottie. Johnson confers that, “despite her “white” body, her college education, and her gentle manner, as well as her resistance to the sexual advances of both black and white men, Non is viewed as an object for men’s sexual pleasure and exploration” (11). What is also disturbing is the fact that Non has lived her entire life under this objectification.

As a young girl, it was Tracy who saved her from being molested by a group of white boys. As enlightened as Non seems to be about race, it puts her in a very dangerous and vulnerable situation with Tracy. Tracy has the ability to move freely from woman to woman, town to town whereas Non does not. Although, Non tries not to think about race, it cannot be denied that she is existing under a racial construction that identifies her as black and him as white. Non moves freely, in silence but is in constant danger as all of Maxwell hovers around her like a predator.
Non’s memory of Tracy saving her from the white boys is predicated on the premise of young white men forcing themselves into the space of a black woman, the black side of Maxwell. This same construction is what all of Maxwell and Colored Town creates to maintain racial boundaries and codes until the lynching of Henry, at which point the fragmentation of the towns collide. Non exists silently through the tumultuous night.

However, Non, as a light skinned black woman seems oblivious to the social exoticism that both black and white men in Maxwell associate with her due to the color of her skin. For black men, Non’s light complexion is a desired object of white men. It is metaphorically separated from the human black woman. The color of her skin becomes the kind of object a white man over-powers. In “Notes on an Alternative Model,” Spillers also suggests that the concept of the Mulatto was created to serve as a median between blackness and whiteness, “a ground of latitude” (301) between the two. It is part of the black female mystique for she is the mulatta. For black and white men it is a space of exoticism and silence as both groups are incapable of expressing the mystery of social commodification associated with placing a value, let alone a sexual value on a woman due to the shade of her skin. Spillers also suggests that:

The “mulatto/a,” just as the “nigger,” tells us little or nothing about the subject buried beneath the epithets, but quite a great deal more concerning the psychic and cultural reflexes that invent and invoke them. I am suggesting that in the stillness of time and space eventuated by the “mulatto/a”—its apparent sameness of fictional, historical, and auto/biographical content—we gain insight into the
theft of the dynamic principle of the living that distinguishes the subject from his/her objectification

This place on the palette of human pigment implies a combination of black and white, a moment when the two colors collide and create a gray area. Spillers goes on to suggest that, like Non, “neither the enslaved man/woman, nor the fugitive-in-freedom would call himself/herself ‘mulatto/a’” (303). Mulatto/a is a white term imposed upon the black community. It is not “a figure of self-referentiality”(303). Just as Smith has Non ignore the blatant confines of her race, Non also ignores the benefits of her light complexion, that would allow her to “pass” for white. Smith does not use her own white privilege to make “mulatto/a” reflexive. Instead, Smith extends the bliss of Non’s naivety and disallows her from recognizing the politics of her pigment at all. Smith perpetuates Non’s skin as praxeological, occupying more than one space at a time, both positive and negative. It is a space of love and hatred; sameness and otherness, an alleged mystery of creation, one that is gazed upon and desired but never humanized.

However, Cheryl Johnson points out that Smith writes Non as a girl who “just happens to be black.” Smiths writing of Non’s skin as non-reflexively mulatta, actively de-races Non. Smith makes Non, just that, “NON” NON-black, NON-White, NON-outspoken, NON threatening to Tracy, and NON voiced, hence the whispering. Non is the erasure of black womanhood and black articulation from the light skinned, black woman. For example, for Non’s sister and family she is called “Nonnie,” to Tracy, she is primarily referred to as “Non.” Within this space Tracy experiences a praxeological dimension of alterity,
Distance or proximity between oneself and an imagined other—“I embrace the other’s values, I identify myself with him; or else I identify the other with myself, I impose my own image upon him; between submission to the other and the other’s submission,

When Tracy and Non meet at night, they both, praxeologically, approach as other. Whispering enables Tracy and Non to safely distance the other from entering a fully voiced, fully articulated exchange. Non attempts to identify with Tracy, by de-racing herself and Tracy. As the couple meet with whispers and shadows in the dark of night on the border of Colored Town and Maxwell they are momentarily submissive to each other and the social-racial politics of their environments.

Todorov’s dimensions of alterity cannot exist in a linear fashion throughout the novel. The dimensions occupy a circular, overlapping, and clashing spaces. Moments of axiological overlap in the text begin just as Non and Tracy approach their praxeological encounter. Non’s skin, is its own evidence of praxeological encounters and the distance afterwards. Non’s feelings towards Tracy are positive and strong. They overlap the axiological dimensions of alterity that identify the other as “good” as “equal” all of which makes Non “glad” to be pregnant with Tracy’s child.

Consequently, Tracy experiences the other side of the axiological. He recognizes Non as “other” and “inferior” but he never recognizes himself as good. He only recognizes himself as someone who has to do “good” and make things “right,” he remains stagnant in the praxeological dimension. Unlike Non, Tracy understands the labels and the white imposed values of Non’s skin. Therefore, he axiologically distances his relationship with Non, with the “other.”
Alterity exists within Maxwell as its own being. The town is only angered when a white man is killed, the decibels of hostility and violence crescendo into the lynching of Henry. The white men of Maxwell lynch Henry as vengeance for Tracy’s death. The loss of one white man from Maxwell threatens the overall masculinity of Maxwell’s white supremacist patriarchs. Henry’s innocence and his loyalty to Tracy Deen make his death even more barbaric.

Henry and Tracy’s relationship exemplifies white authority and black submission. Robyn Wiegman, in her essay, “The Anatomy of Lynching,” identifies lynching, as an ultimate act of submission. Weigman argues that the lynching of black men is an act of castration, and sexual dominance, similar to rape. Wiegman exemplifies this idea in African American literature with the Bigger Thomas, in Richard Wright’s novel Native Son, and Ralph Ellison’s “The Birthmark,” as negotiations of physical space and physical dominance. Wiegman’s extrapolation of lynching along with Todorov’s dimensions of alterity, align the events leading up to Tracy’s death and Henry’s lynching as negotiations of physical space and white supremacy.

Weigman stresses the importance of literary analysis in order to observe:

The interplay between the myth of the black rapist and the disciplinary mechanism of lynching and castration as a negotiation through discourses of sexual difference, of the threat of African American enfranchisement in the post-civil war years.

This interplay negotiates the space of black and white race relations. The act of lynching is the imposition of white supremacist dominance over the black (in this case, male) minority, such as when Tracy betrays Henry’s friendship for dominance and sells
Non to Henry. Henry’s acceptance of the deal is also the acceptance of Tracy’s ability to impose fear, if Henry was to reject the offer, in addition to violence and submission on the black community.

Henry and Tracy’s friendship began when they were children when Henry’s parents worked for the Deen family. While Tracy and Henry may have seemed like friends in childhood, Tracy takes advantage of Henry’s fidelity when he asks Henry to marry Non.

Tracy uses his relationship with Henry as an alterical vehicle to move between dimensions. Again Tracy’s acts fluctuate between the axiological and the praxeological. Tracy must act through his awareness of how he sees the ‘other’ which is clearly as inferior. Tracy proceeds to establish dominance over the other, by buying selling Non and buying Henry, to buy back enough of his conscience to go to Dottie with “clean hands.” Tracy cleanses himself by establishing distance with Non and Henry, with the other, rendering Henry a pawn.

Smith makes the exchange between Henry and Tracy ambiguous. In fact, Henry does not verbalize the arrangement until he goes to Salamander’s and explains to Little Gabe (with Ed Anderson coincidentally listening in the background) how he received one hundred dollars.

“Tracy Deen done gimme dis money cause he and me, we friens, and we’se make a bargain.”

“What kind of a bargain?”

Henry turned to the counter, swallowed the remainder of his third cup of whisky. “Hit’s a private bargain,” he giggled drunkenly, “about a girl.” Rolling his eyes now, trying to leer.

“What girl?”
Henry rolling his eyes now. "Oh, jes a girl. Hit's a secret!" he giggled.
"What girl? Come on—what girl?"
Jus a purty girl what he done got into trouble."
Ed sat up as if a knife had been shoved through him.
What's yo bargain? Bill piped hungrily.

"I'm to marry her." Henry laughed. "Yead man, he give me a hundred bucks, and dis big boy gwine to marry Nonnie Anderson to—"
They tried to stop him, for someone had seen Ed (219).

In this moment, Tracy uses his white, male arrogance to betray Non's future.

Tracy believes that Henry will keep his loyalty to Tracy and act as a husband in title only. Tracy's proposition for Henry denies Henry his manhood as well as the freedom of both Henry and Non. Tracy tries to create an arrangement that suits his own needs and denies everyone else's, thus proving that Tracy's interracial friendship with Henry creates another catastrophic ending. In fact, the deal is so secretive that the reader does not receive its details until Henry's exchange at the bar thus protecting Tracy's voice of power. Furthermore, Ed's presence in the room as Henry divulges this information, serves to direct both Henry and Tracy to vicious, untimely deaths, making the wasted lives of these men more than just Tracy Deen's responsibility. Tracy and Henry's deaths are violent collision of the axiological and praxeological alterical dimensions, as both groups hate the other and therefore must force submission onto the other.

Henry's lynching brings to light the impotency of the black man against white society. While Sam helps Ed escape, after he kills Tracy, there is an overwhelming silence of the black man's voice for fear of white mob violence—lynching. Ed's leaving generates mobility to safety and Sam's ability to help Ed. These men are powerless to the unjust murder of Henry. They are powerless to maintain any boundaries that protect black
women in the way that white men isolate the purity of white women at the hands of black women who black men cannot protect. At moments in the novel, Smith aligns black men with white women as both groups have severely limited mobility and both groups are subject to white patriarchal punishment. This is particularly evident as Tracy moves from his space into Non’s space, never considering the consequences, or the cost of freedom that comes from his usurpation of space. Meanwhile, Sam and Ed leave Maxwell quietly and fearfully.

Maxwell is a continual collision of alterical dimensions that constantly betrays one side to the other. The inhabitants of Maxwell follow suit as Tracy betrays his relationship with Non with his relationship with Dottie and vice versa. Tracy betrays his relationship with Henry to his white privilege. Innocent life is betrayed by death. Silence is betrayed by chaos. The interracial couple, betrays one race to another, creates a collision of alterity that ends in lynching.

Non’s family is aware that both sides of Maxwell are re-acting to the repercussions of an interracial relationship. The rest of Maxwell sees a white life that needs to be avenged and a black man who will die for it. However, the vengeance is due primarily to skewed mobility of each side of town. Tracey did not acknowledge social boundaries when he began his relationship with Non. Non dis-acknowledged these boundaries and yet both Tracy and Non deny each other access to their vocal mobility. Neither one knows what the other has planned outside of a few brief whispers. Concurrently, Henry’s death is indicative of Sam’s silent plan to repair the damage from Tracy and Non’s relationship by helping Ed to escape, and later, by offering to marry Non.
Upon Tracy’s proposal for Henry to marry Non, he does not recognize that he is using a “friend” as another service that his race can purchase. Tracy makes Henry as voiceless and powerless as the rest of the men in Colored Town, by attempting to claim Henry’s life for his own selfish purposes. Henry’s death is a cautionary message for the friendships of black and white men. It is a border too bloody and tainted with betrayal to be crossed, a silent killer.

Tracy’s fragmented existence leads him to wander throughout the community. He expresses his misgivings about marrying Dottie on a drive to see Brother Dunwoodie. Here he thinks to himself as he travels. There is silence and mobility. There is also the confusion of his relationships with Non and Dottie. However, Tracy’s feelings about Non seem to revolve primarily around the fact, that by marrying Dottie, he relinquishes his freedom. This makes Non nothing more that a vessel for the free will of the white man. Johnson supports that, although Non is a fictional character, she represents other black women who are victims of racist and sexist ideas of black women’s “essential” nature. Preacher Dunwoodie explains to Tracy the predicament of white men who travel to colored town, “Let their passions run clean away with them. Get to lusting—burning up! And they get to thinking they’d rather have that kind of thing than marriage” (12). Smith demonstrates that reading black women as naturally promiscuous by white men simply gives white men license to violate black women’s bodies and, simultaneously, control white women’s exploration of their own sexuality.

While black women move around Maxwell to work and white men gravitate to Colored Town for sexual rites of passage. However, in the novel, white women seldom acknowledge their severely limited mobility. The only exception is Tracy Deen’s sister,
Laura who is a closeted lesbian, and does not align herself with the stagnancy of rest of the women in the town. Dottie seems to move from church to home waiting for the day that she will marry Tracy.

The stagnancy of the white women in this novel reflects the efforts to maintain the safety and “purity” of white women, to preserve their “true womanhood” by keeping them homebound, subservient and sexually “pure.” However, the maintenance of white women comes at the sacrifice of black women. There is no alliance between black and white women in this novel to preserve each other. It seems as though, there is a silent gratitude that white women have knowing that white men can leave them alone and bother black women.

Dottie, Tracy’s white girlfriend, fits perfectly into the paradigm of white women in waiting. She is waiting for someone to give her an opportunity to fill a position as a wife. What she does not realize is that the innocence and the life that she is waiting eagerly to begin hinges on Tracy’s relationship with Nonnie. Until Tracy decides to marry Dottie she seems confined to her home, to the limits of her front porch. However, the only capacity Dottie can attempt to fill for Tracy is mourner.

Tracy’s death is indicative of the unspoken conflict and tension between the residents of Maxwell and Colored Town. As Ed, Non’s brother kills Tracy to protect the honor of his sister; it creates a domino effect of social interaction between the towns. Silence escalates into violent screams of hatred. Stagnancy turns into the violation of personal life and space, a tearing down of all boundaries, a saying of all words. Here is where the fragments of both towns begin to alterically collide. There are the white women who do not change the black women who must go to Maxwell everyday to work
for the white women who do nothing. There are the white men who hate the black men and want to violate black women.

Even the language, when the towns begin to interact, is different. Bess, Non’s sister, switches codes in her interactions with white people. Bess, Ed, and Sam understand the importance of excluding the white people from the intimacy of private language. Meanwhile, it is easy for Bess, and other women who work in the Maxwell homes to gather enough information to protect themselves from white people by pretending to ignore the white codes of language. Non and Tracy are the only two who try to communicate with each other in their own hushed language. This attempt to communicate reflects the unavoidable yet unspoken epistemic level of alterity.

Both Tracy and Non speak in whispers, attempt to communicate, both are wildly ignorant of the others position and system of beliefs, “I know or am ignorant of the other’s identity...of course there is no absolute here, but an endless gradation between the lower of higher states of knowledge”(305). Neither Tracy nor Non are operating on higher states of knowledge in their moments together. Instead, their interactions are immediate. There is no future for the couple outside of what Non wishes and what Tracy knows he must avoid. Both are ignorant to their roles in Maxwell’s social order. In the text, neither of Smith’s characters expresses an awareness of their actions on the larger community. Although, Maxwell and Colored town operate between silence and screaming, and Tracy and Non’s whispering is a middle ground, it remains a dangerous and conflicted middle ground on which the racial differences surface but are never really addressed. Here, the epistemic dimension finally begins to collide with the axiological
and praxeological dimensions, this collision of all three dimensions continues into the end of the novel.

The end of *Strange Fruit* provides no answers for the chaos, fragmentation, and racial collision that occurs within the text. For a moment, all mobility is brought to an extreme as Ed flees Colored Town and the white lynch mob infiltrates in search of a scapegoat to rectify Tracy's death. While Non is not responsible for Tracy or Henry's death Cheryl Johnson observes,

Her [Non's] apparent lack of historical consciousness or cultural understanding of the dangers and restrictions racism imposes on her, her unborn child, and the other blacks in her community, combined with her supposedly pure, simple love for a man...Nonnie's characterization fell victim to Smith's resistance to racism's lies and distortions and their impact on the hearts and souls of black and white southerners (13).

Non does not realize that her relationship with Tracy possesses the potential of racialized, mob violence. However, it is a spasm of danger. The moment is fleeting. The lynching of Henry is a racial ejaculation of white anger. A desperate moment for the hateful people of Maxwell to act out their repressed anger. Weigman would concur that the lynching is single moment for white men to cleanse their guilty consciences of lusting after black women, and choose whiteness, outwardly and aggressively, in a moment of sexualized anger and a passion to dominate. In the meantime, it leaves the inhabitants of Colored Town afraid but, sadly, not surprised, as the vengeance and dominance of the white man is nothing new.
I am conflicted about the end of the novel, by the way that Bess, Non, and Dessie woke up the day after Henry was lynched and went to work. Three women, one venture back into the white side of Maxwell tries to remain unscathed by the brutality of the previous night. They walked in silence, once again, as they crossed the boundaries into Maxwell, “everything would be the same—as it always was” (250), Non still pregnant with the silence of her and Tracy’s relationship and seemingly oblivious to the chain of events that their relationship caused.

What is most disturbing and ambiguous is Non’s inability to feel partially responsible for what happened to Tracy and Henry and even Ed. As a thirteen-year-old girl, is her innocence strikingly dangerous or is has she been desensitized by living in such a volatile community?

As a text written in the 1940’s south, how can a reader construe the end of Smith’s novel? This could be a very dangerous text, a weapon. On one hand it addresses the relationship of a young black and white couple, of a young white man learning about the patriarchy he is to practice only to be struck down before assimilating to the masses of his white, male, oppressor, forefathers in the 1920’s. Emancipation is not a very distant memory, particularly in the opinions of those who were against it.

On the other hand, Non, a thirteen year old black girl, carrying the child of a 17 year old dead white boy, leaves her house the morning after the lynching of her dead boyfriends servant, and ‘bobs’ to work, with the weight of what stereotypes? bell hooks discusses the idea of the black woman as a Sapphire stereotype and contends that the media’s portrayal of black women in the 1930’s-1940’s epitomizes the stereotype. In the article, “Continued Devaluation of Black Women,” bell hooks argues the relevancy of the
the Perry and Bond essay “The Black Woman,” which explores the Sapphire character in the media of the 1930’s and 1940’s, arguing that,

Movies and radio shows in the 1930’s and 1940’s invariably pedaled the Sapphire image of the black woman: she is depicted as iron willed, effectual, treacherous toward and contemptible of black men, the latter being portrayed as simpering, ineffectual whimpering boys. Certainly, most of us have encountered domineering Black females (and white ones too). Many of then have been unlucky in life and love and seek a bitter haven from their disappointments in fanatical self sufficiency (Perry and Bond in hooks, 85).

This description of black women exemplifies the media’s attempt to disempower the resiliency of black woman and also to disalign black women from the black race by claiming that they are “unlucky in life and love.” This creates a bitter and hateful picture of black women, a picture that asks every onlooker, black or white, to judge and dislike the black woman. This attempted disalignment of black women, in the name of Sapphire, renders without community, thus making it easier for white men to control patriarchal/supremacist power over black men and black women via separation and discord among the race.

Is this the fate of Non Anderson? If so, then what about the child she carries? Smith uses Non as a rite of passage for Tracy. She uses Non as a creator of a new race, as a woman who does not acknowledge boundaries but one who lives in a society dictated by boundaries, by dimensions of consciousness. Boundaries create mystery. Boundaries create the temptation to be crossed and broken.
Smith uses the interracial couple in *Strange Fruit* as a living crossed boundary. Non is the object of desire, the greener grass. Non is the exotic other. She is a fetish, an obsession, rather than a person. Her silence and gentle language make her a fantasy for Tracy, a tangible fantasy.

According to Toni Morrison’s work “Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks” in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, racism represents a degree of decay on society. I think that Tracy Deen’s obsession with Non as a fantasy indicates the perpetual decay of white patriarchy as a space which never matures but continues on its progression into the bowels of corruption. Tracy Deen, as a young white man, is the perpetration of white society. His death is the death of patriarchy. The vengeance of his death is the chaos that white society foresees in the face of its own decline. It is self-perpetrated and stagnant. What is even more disturbing is that Tracy’s death is the catalyst for the collision of alterical dimensions. Tracy’s murder is the overlapping of the axiological onto the praxeological and epistemic. Henry’s death becomes an extension of dominance, an acknowledgement of superior over inferior. Tracy’s only escape is his obsession with Non, a black woman, and his fetishization of her as a being only there to comfort him. Non, so certain that she is acting freely, becomes a servant and a concubine to Tracy. Toni Morrison describes this fetishization as:

> Especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex.
Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery (68).

If Non’s pregnancy represents the combining of white blood and black blood then Tracy’s relationship with her was the attempt to maintain the purity of Dottie, the white woman. Tracy is employing a means of civilized savagery by having a relationship with Non. Although, she believes that she went freely into her relationship with Tracy Deen, it is the pursuit of her, which is savage.

However, in the effort to keep Dottie pure, Tracy contaminates Non’s blood with his own blood and intentions.

That was Non. Her body— or a drink of water. It’d all be the same. And she’d give it like a swamp bay lets you smell its sweetness. Just as simply. Not Dorothy. He’d have a time with that girl...Dorothy’d think it wrong or the way wrong, or too much of it wrong, or something. It didn’t make much difference though. As long as he had Non (147).

Smith creates a male character with no intention other than keeping Non. Tracy’s affection is for Non’s willingness, he sees very little beyond what she does for him and how she makes him feel. Tracy gives little in return. His attempt to keep Non for use after he marries Dorothy, by arranging her marriage to Henry, exemplifies his complete arrogance and blindness to Non as woman, a human. Tracy does not see Non or Henry as people, he sees service and privilege, lust and practicality. Furthermore, Smith does not have Tracy respond much to the Non’s pregnancy as though it were just another thing that silence and money could repair. Much in the way that his relationship with Non is a whisper. It is secret, concealed in its axiological moment.
Section II: The Struggle to be Women

Bess Anderson, Dottie, Laura Deen and Mrs. Deen are voices in the text who become drowned out by anger and action. However, these female characters create the dialogue for women. As each character struggles with her own alterical place in the socially tense town of Maxwell, they also struggle with being a woman in the south. They have all made sacrifices in one way or another in order to survive. Furthermore, they have had to make sacrifices, that whether they realize it or not, are a result of Tracy and Non’s relationship.

Bess Anderson, struggles to keep her family together while her husband, Jack, works on a train. Bess cares for her son and Non. After the death of her mother, Bess is the newest matriarch. For the novel, Bess is the most clear and consistent character. She protects her family, the codes of her community, and her space as a black woman in the novel.

Bess acknowledges and respects the space she creates between white Maxwell and her own consciousness. Bess clearly loves and esteems herself and family. She exists in a spiral of alterical dimensions, living each day with the awareness that she is good, yet she must keep her distance from the other, and while she may be ignorant to all of white identity, knows enough about black and white racial relations, to protect herself with distance. Bess holds this space sacred. Above all, Bess is the only female character in Strange Fruit to bear witness to and denounce Non and Tracy’s relationship in defense of black women.

Dottie is the youthful epitome of what white men think of white women. Smith portrays Dottie in the strictest of Southern convention. Dottie waits patiently to marry
Tracy and is so virtuous, patient, and complacent that Tracy thinks that he must absolve himself of sin before marrying her. What this really means is that he must end his affair with Non.

If Dottie is the pre-marital version of a southern woman, Mrs. Deen is the post-marital example. She fights to maintain social convention and familial appearances in Maxwell. She is the wife of a doctor and believes in her station to define her space as a woman and as mother who is expected to produce perfect, flawless children, both emotionally and physically. While Tracy and Laura appear perfect they are destroyed on the inside as each child has fallen victim to the oppression of the Deen family.

Laura Deen gives up her life at a college in the north to return home to her family. She sacrifices her happiness and a space of freedom. Her mother seemingly punishes Laura, who is implied to be a lesbian, and her personal belongings destroyed when Mrs. Deen learns that she is the friend of a woman who is a “bad influence.” Unfortunately, Laura remains at home. She gives up her life in an attempt to identify with the southern female tradition that Dottie has so embraced. I think that Tracy’s death makes Laura’s station at home impossible to abandon, as she is now the only Deen child and therefore, her responsibilities to achieve familial expectations escalates.

What is really tragic for Laura is that her brother, and his selfishness or adherence to tradition takes away her free will, just as he was trying to obstruct Non’s and even Dottie’s. The voices of women in Strange Fruit are tense with frustration, pain, and oppression. These voices are also lost among a novel that was considered a love story, in upon its release.
Non’s sister, Bess Anderson, is the only character that Lillian Smith gives voice to who sees the feminine socio-historic tradition of danger in Non’s relationship with Tracy. Bess is literally clenched with frustration when she sees her sister sitting alone in the dark waiting for Tracy Deen. “Padded barefooted to the back door. She had made up her mind. She was going to hear what words this white man was saying to Nonnie, what words after all these years he was still saying, and then she’d say a few herself” (39). Bess’s temper alternates between anger and pity. She is angry with the way Tracy has treated Non. However, she pities Non’s tolerance of Tracy. Much in the way that Non feels that race and the animosity between black and white people is enough to drive a person “crazy,” Bess feels a similar insanity as she watches a white man take advantage of her sister.

However, Bess does not limit her frustration to only white men, in her tirade over Tracy Deen, “how she hated Tracy Deen! Every white man. All Men!”(40). This scene problematizes the relationships between white men and black women. “Bess was shaking with fury”(39). There is no equity in Tracy and Non’s relationship. Bess recognizes that there has never been any equity in interracial relationships. Through Bess, Smith recognizes the treatment of black women by white men as objects used as pass times, as exoticized semi-human vessels where white men can fulfill sexual fetishes, and most importantly to white men, a space that maintains the purity of white women as virtuous and honorable, attributes that if applied to black women, would also make them complete as human women to white men. Non and Tracy’s relationship is not filled with love and companionship. It is filled with the traditions of the old south that as Smith says in her memoir, led white men down backyard paths to cabins and slave quarters.
Bess watches while Non sits, patiently awaiting the moment that Tracy Deen will return again to fill this space that is only sacred at night, in the dark and otherwise, shameful during the day, she remains silent. Tracy never comes back. At this point, whether he is dead or drunk is irrelevant because Non is replaced with a white woman. In other words, for Tracy (as Bess sees it) Non never had a space that was taken. According to Bess, the empty box on which Tracy would sit beside Non during their visits, “was now a symbol of white men and black women” (40). Tracy uses Non until the time comes for him to settle down with Dottie, with a white woman.

Bess’s clear opposition to the traditions of white patriarchal society could cause Bess and women who openly shared her fury to be stereotyped as Sapphire. bell hooks, in “Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood,” purports that United States slavery systems ruined any hope for positive images of black women. Post slavery, black women even tried to emulate the characteristics of white women much to the resistance of white society:

sexual exploitation of black women continued long after slavery ended and was institutionalized by other oppressive practices. Devaluation of black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence and self-respect (59).

In Strange Fruit, it is possible that the same audiences who viewed this novel as a tragic love story misinterpret Lillian Smiths authorship as mocking black women. History and literary interpretation is not on the side of Lillian Smith as she writes Bess into the role of a self-sufficient, protective matriarch of the Anderson family. After all, Bess’s own husband Jack is absent for the majority of the novel as an employee on a railcar. My
concern is that the absence of Jack could be the thing that causes Bess to be read as a Sapphire, with her husband gone for long periods of time to avoid the tension and anger that Bess may impose upon her family. Although, Bess does not express an overall disgust with her life, it is her inner monologue of disgust with the male gender as she waits in the dark for Tracy Deen to appear that may cause her to be misunderstood.

hooks continues on to say that, “the Sapphire identity has been projected onto any black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger, and rage about her lot. Consequently, many black women repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish or Sapphires. Or they embrace the Sapphire identity as a reaction to the harsh treatment of black women in society. The “evilness” of a given black woman may merely be that façade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable”(86). Bess, as a black woman who lived in the south all her life, is particularly in tuned to the rigors of survival that she must endure to successfully maintain the existence of herself and family in 1920’s Georgia. Bess cannot subscribe to the indoctrinated purity of the cult of true womanhood. She cannot pretend that sexism and white predators do not harbor a threat to her or her family whether she is out on the street or at home. Bess’s life is focused on survival and protection from white men hold fast to the chattel slavery mongrelization of their forefathers. And yet, if Bess were to express the disgust and dislike for this group that she feels and experiences everyday, she would be the one to be negatively labeled.

Yet, Smith gives Bess voice, responsibility and a fearlessness to rule the Anderson matriarchy. bell hooks outlines the risks involved in this decision. Claudia Tate in the article, “Allegories of Black Female Desire,” Tate discusses the authorship of black
women in the nineteenth century and their endeavors to create literary work that may serve as cautionary tales for readers. Tate discusses such pieces as Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, Amelia Johnson’s *Clarence and Corinne*, and Emma Dunham Kelley’s *Megda*. In reference to these texts Tate purports that,

Black women’s post-bellum sentimental narratives, then, construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct Victorian gender conventions in order to designate black female subjectivity as a most potent force in the advancement of the race. In order to interpret selected antebellum and post-bellum narratives as allegories of black female desire, I seek to reclaim a hermeneutical understanding of these texts as feminized mediations of what is conventionally understood as male power. In other words, by providing readings that are experiential encounters with black women’s novelistic traditions and that speak through the work, I propose to read black women’s nineteenth-century sentimental narratives as discourses of liberation (107).

Smith’s exists in a relatively isolated genre of post-bellum literature about black women, written by white women, as social commentaries on the injustices of black women at the hands of white men and white society in general, I think it would be beneficial for *Strange Fruit* audiences to read Bess Anderson as a liberated character. Bess understands the struggles that she faces as a black woman and that other black women face regularly. She does not try to subscribe to Victorian models of womanhood that black women before her may have attempted to emulate. She does not see how it has been successful for white women, and as a black woman she negates the importance of a system created by the same white men who exploit her sister and other black women.
Bess, is the leader of a family. While some readers may be put off by her exclamation of hatred for all men, the reasons behind her feelings cannot be ignored or discounted or negated as untrue when her environment serves as the text by which to read the injustices of black women at the hands of white men. And why should she hate all men?

It does not appear that Bess hates “all men.” It seems that Bess pities the black man because he is virtually as powerless as black women when it comes to taking a stand in the community, succeeding and surviving safely as a human being in the south. Her husband maintains life by working on the railroad and traveling most of the time. Her brother is only in town on a visit. Sam is one of the few black men in town to maintain safety and respect. This is only because he is a doctor who white men call to care for their black sharecroppers when they are ill. The only time Bess has a chance to explode with frustration is at night, in the dark, when her internal monologue rumbles with anger as she watches her sister fall victim to the shame and objectification of white men in a society that resists change.

Meanwhile, in the fashion of being resistant to change, Dorothy, Tracy Deen’s fiancé maintains the white woman’s association with the cult of true womanhood, the pre-Victorian notions of white female purity and virtuosity that causes men to deify women as models of godliness on earth. In Strange Fruit, Dorothy (or Dottie) is never presented outside the confines of Tracy Deen/ The first mention of her is by Mr. Deen, who internally pines that Tracy treats her like a “little cheap thing”(85) as Dorothy waits for him to stop philandering and gambling and settle down with her. For example, When Tracy seeks the council of Preacher Dunwoodie, Tracy is instructed to, “Get your Dorothy a ring. Go to her with your hands as clean as that fine little girl deserves, and ask
her to marry you and marry you quick”(100). Is Tracy Deen’s relationship with Non Anderson the only thing would soil Dorothy?

The opinion of Dorothy as a pure and honest girl waiting for her heathenist boyfriend to commit is the opinion of both Preacher Dunwoodie and Mrs. Deen. In fact, this affirmation of Dorothy’s character is so stringent that the prospect of marrying her is a stressful notion for Tracy. Dorothy’s patience and virtuosity is astounding. Smith creates a character who can see no other future that the plans she will make with Tracy.

Dorothy...He could see her as she had been tonight on the porch swing. Wearing a green voile dress which she had made herself. She’d told him that. Crisp black hair, gray-yellow eyes. Face thin, as she was, and sometimes with a way of looking very pretty and petite in a small-town way. She’d be cute at fifty and not so petite either—probably skinny. Well, that was Dorothy. Clean, herself, and kept the Pusey house clean (146).

Dorothy’s virtue makes Tracy feel as though he is not good enough for her. Dorothy is simple and domestically sufficient. She has been trained to express herself through domestic accomplishments, such as making a dress or cleaning a house. Tracy always contemplates the kind of person that she is by what she can do or has done, for example, the “green voile dress” that she made for herself. She is quaint and proper. She is a proper southern white woman.

There is nothing more to Dorothy than what the reader experiences through Tracy. As a woman she is a shell of a domesticated creature. She is beyond human. She is a young Madonna in search of the man who will dehumanize her by deifying her.
Sitting on the swing on the Pusey porch tonight, Dot had drawn close to him. In the dark the swing moved back and forth, creaking with its movement, and Dot had drawn near. She had placed her body close to his, in brittle proximity. Not a soft fluid unmeasured giving to him, or taking from him, but in precise definition of their relationship. *We can go this far now*, her body said, as it edged up to his, *this far. After we are married, a little farther* (184).

Tracy interprets Dorothy’s purity with the movement of her body. Like a statue posed beside him, Tracy thinks that Dorothy’s movements are deliberate and representative of southern propriety. Dottie makes no case otherwise for herself. She talks of furniture that the couple will acquire from family member. She talks about having “a beautiful old place in the country” (185) and collecting antiques. Not only is Dorothy the living example of Southern Tradition but also she plans to surround Tracy with antiques—objects that symbolize ‘good southern people.’

Should Dorothy be blamed for continuing the tradition of the environment in which she has thrived so comfortably? Is it her fault that her fiancé can only think of having a future with her so long as he has arranged to have Non available to him? Or is this what Dorothy, as an archaically simple southern woman deserves—a male counterpart with an equally archaic mentality.

The way that Tracy thinks he will be able to sneak off and visit Non, who will be platonically married and cared for, bears the moral equivalent of a slave master sneaking off to his slave quarters at night.

Yes, there’d always be Nonnie. When Dot got behind him too much with her paintbrush he’d go to Nonnie [...] And she’d let him get everything out his system
and would sit there, not talking but there. And whatever he wanted she would give him. That was Non. Her body—or a drink of water. It’d all be the same (147).

Tracy remains epistemically ignorant of Non’s abilities and her right to a future. Tracy maintains “the endless gradation between social classes.” His only concern is to first protect and cleanse himself, and then create distance between he and Non, and finally, to force himself to commit to Dottie, another woman of whom Tracy remains epistemically ignorant.

However, Dorothy’s lot as woman has not changed since the Victorian era. Her rights in the south are practically the same. As a woman she is still expected to make a home and have children and maintain a respectable and virtuous composure.

Unfortunately, the responsibilities and expectation of white southern women negatively impact how southern men should treat them. Due to the fact that these women are not expected to be multi-dimensional. They exist between the axiological and epistemic dimensions. They are good white men. They look at their good white women and believe that these women, in their whiteness, can only be ranked far above that of black women in an endless gradation of race. Dorothy’s maintenance of the expectations of her gender further impact the exploitation of black women at the hands of white men who are intimidated by their white female counterparts.

Smith elaborates on the problems of white southern womanhood in her memoir, Killers of the Dream. Smith poses that white southern Christian womanhood is a male predicated model. According to Smith, the same white men who boasted their puritanical Christianity carried on relations with black women contrary to white, Christian doctrine. Smith explains that white men began to:
mate with these dark women whom they had dehumanized in their minds and fathered children by them who, according to their exotic race philosophy, were “without souls” -a strange exotic new kind of creature, whom they made slave of and sometimes sold on the auction block. The white man’s role as slaveholder and Christian and puritan were exacting far more than the strength of his mind could sustain (120).

Smith’s account of the historical problems with chattel slavery for the white man is his inability to recognize the black woman as human, as this would make raping her and selling her and her family too difficult, he chose to dehumanize and de womanize her. In the process of de-gendering and dehumanizing the black woman the white slave master’s wife became the recipient of overcompensation. In order to completely dehumanize a woman as an ungodly savage, another woman would have to serve as the model of human godliness embodied. And so, the white woman is put on her first pedestal. As Smith purports in her memoir:

Each time he [the white man] found the back-yard temptation irresistible, his conscience split more deeply from his acts and his mind from things as they are. The race-sex-sin spiral had begun. The more trails the white man made to back-yard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal when he returned to the big house. The higher the pedestal, the less he enjoyed her whom he had put there, for statues after all are only nice things to look at. More and more numerous became the little trails of escape from the statuary and more and more intricately they began to weave in and out of southern life. Guilt, shame, fear, lust spiraled each other (121).
Smith’s historical account of the slave owners internal conflict with taking advantage of black women derives from the author’s experiences with growing up in the south in the 1920’s, the same time setting as *Strange Fruit*. Tracy’s actions are severely rooted in the immediate history of the south.

In *Killers of the Dream*, Smith’s reference to the southern white males’ exploitation of black women as the “race-sex-sin-spiral,” (121) is also recognizable as spiraling axiological, praxeological, and epistemic dimensions. Each of these spirals identifies the characteristics of southern consciousness, white manifested racism, slavery, subjugation, and hypocrisy. According to Smith, a southerner, such as Tracy Deen, must be able to know when to recognize the other (in this case, black women) as “bad” and when “to impose an images of whiteness on the other” in an effort to force submission, and lastly, to maintain “endless gradation” between the other and disable the white consciousness from admitting that the black race is equal to the white race.

Tracy is a member of a small community where history is not forgotten. For example, after Tracy’s meeting with Preacher Dunwoodie to confirm that he should go to Dorothy with his ‘hand clean’ of Non Anderson, Tracy thinks to himself that white “Maxwell was on his side”(184). Tracy, as the white men before him, manipulated their axiological consciousness to rationalize that due to the fact that, the other is inferior, then the superior human has the can dominate and subjugate the other. Applying Spiller and Todorov, to Smith’s novel, confirms the white male supremacist ideology that all women were inferior. Making the white man axiologically ignorant, to the point that white men placed value on all women, making white women worth more than black women. This complete devaluation of black women is the praxeological submission.
Dorothy remains the happy, blind victim of domestic subjugation. Along with keeping house she will be the one to make excuses for Tracy’s behavior. Even as she waits patiently for him to marry her, there is no substance or thought to her character that a better mate might be available. Like a prisoner happy in her cell, she waits for her jailor to bring her food or any sustenance that will keep her life pleasant and oblivious.

Dorothy is the perfect match for Tracy because she does not question him. In fact, Dorothy questions nothing she is in axiological bliss. She acknowledges herself as “good” and quietly follows Maxwell’s doctrine making all others inferior regardless of the fact that Maxwell, may praise the white woman, but subjugates her nonetheless. Even when Tracy believes that the rest of the town thinks that she is too good for him, Dorothy will “make Deen a fine little wife, better than he deserves”(184). Smith uses Dorothy as an example of young white southern women. The very women who marry the white men who exploit black women, the white women who have children with white men and propagate species of white southern towns.

In order for white men to mongrelize black women in the perils of slavery, white women also became victims of white patriarchal domestic slavery. They were expected to be opposite of what white men perceived black women to be. If a black woman was a jezebel, a white woman was a Madonna. If a black woman was enslaved as a subhuman being, then white women were superhuman. As pillars of domestic and marital perfection, white women came to experience a different kind of slavery. Like black women, they were not considered people but their plight was heard by a small few. The primary difference being that obedient white women benefited from White patriarchal subjugation. They were praised or spared, but never considered equal. For example,
Angel Davis in the piece, “Class and Race in the Early Women’s Rights Campaign” from her book, *Women, Race, and Class* observes in her discussion of the 1850’s Seneca Falls Declaration the articulator of the “consciousness of women rights at mid-century” (53) exclaimed that:

the institution of marriage and its many injurious effects on women: marriage robbed women of their property rights, making wives economically—as well as morally—dependent on their husbands. Demanding absolute obedience from wives, the institution of marriage gave husbands the right to punish their wives and what it more, the laws of separation and divorce were almost entirely based on male supremacy (53).

The Seneca Falls declaration proposed that white women were victims and domestically imprisoned yet, unlike black women, change was not as distant on the horizon in the 1920’s. Pretty soon, white women would claim their own liberation. With contemporaries such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass aiding their plight white women by the 1920’s would betray black women in the manner of their husbands and fathers. Leaving black women to collect the burden of white men and the pain of subjugation and inhumanity again. With *Strange Fruit* set in the 1920’s all of this seems to pass by Dorothy. She continues in the life of women with no rights of privileges but subjugated nonetheless and betraying black women by her oblivion as she maintains the model of purity that causes Tracy to maintain the traditions of his southern, slave master forefathers.

After Tracy’s death, Dorothy assists the Deen family as though she was his wife. She tends to Tracy’s wake adjusting the lighting in the house and arranging flowers. She
and her family stay beside the Deen’s through the services. For Dorothy this is the only opportunity she will ever have to fulfill her responsibility to Tracy’s comfort. In the funeral scene Smith exemplifies Dorothy’s behavior in the following description:

Dorothy Pusey stood near by with Mrs. Pusey. Dorothy’s handkerchief was already a wet little sop as she moved it, like a small white ball, restlessly from one hand to the other. Greenish circles deepened the pallor beneath her reddened eyes. She had on a black and white dress, and somehow she looked very widowed and bereaved (323).

The “somehow” in this excerpt supports the idea that Dorothy did not necessarily have the relationship with Tracy that would necessitate her deep sadness. Perhaps it is Smith’s insinuation that Tracy did not deserve to be mourned in this manner, by Dorothy because of his infidelities to her. Perhaps this mourning would be more sincere if it was coming from Non. Or perhaps Dorothy is not mourning Tracy for the person he was but for the loss of the future she would have made for him, the loss of her post as a young wife. Her silence is like iron even after her mother tells her that, “they found his body out to Colored Town. You know what that means”(349). For Dottie to act in another capacity would move her alterical dimensions. Dottie, in her oblivion is still, not moving, speaking, or reflecting on the situation. Dottie is the axiological and therefore, regardless of how Tracy treated her, Dottie sobs.

Dorothy exists in contrast to Laura Deen, Tracy’s sister. Laura is a female embodiment of alterical spiraling. Laura, although, privileged enough by the Deen’s family position to go away to college, returns home to a life of oppression. Laura is oppressed both socially and sexually. She lives in the shadow of Tracy’s male sanctioned
privileged and even in all of her oppression she is more aware of the potential for women, possible white and black, than Dorothy.

Laura Deen comes from one of Maxwell’s more privileged families. Her mother, Alma Deen, exemplifies proper white southern wives. Her father, Tut, is a physician. While Tracy fails at his ability to make the family proud, Laura holds the most potential.

Smith outlines these expectations for Laura in the novel. They are more strongly contrasted by Laura’s attempts to create personal growth. Laura goes to college, of the two Deen children; Alma Deen takes more of a vested interest in Laura, even telling Tut Deen “Maxwell is not place for her, Tut. I want to get her away from here. I want her to get her degree”(158). As much as Alma cares for her daughter, she is also trying to mold her into the woman that perhaps, Alma wished she could have been instead of a doctor’s wife. Although Laura attends college and is the only white woman to travel to and from Maxwell, she is still oppressed. Laura’s alterical dimensions greatly contrast her living situation and place in southern society.

Smith encapsulates Laura’s immobility as a woman, her personal-social immobility, as a lesbian on the terms of her relationship with her mother. Laura is alterically marginalized by her mother. For example, Laura never states her sexual orientation directly, only through the memories of conversations that she has had with her mother, which occurs with more frequency after Alma destroys a clay statue of a naked woman that Laura sculpted. The model that posed for the sculpture is Jane Harris, also a resident of Maxwell, whom Mrs. Deen “warns” Laura about and sets out to destroy any signs of a friendship between the two women. Alma Deen axiologically stratifies Laura when she destroys the clay figure, and in doing so, demonizes relationships and
communication between women. Alma Deen imposes her opinion that Jane Harris is deviant and abnormal upon Laura. Alma Deens expressed ignorance of Jane Harris, as "other" makes Laura feel powerless.

In the following excerpt, after a conversation with her mother about Jane, in the middle of the night, Laura looks over letters she has received from Jane.

Yes, they did write to each other, even though they lived in the same town. They had so much to say. There was so much you could say to Jane that you had never before been able to say to anyone. Laura's heart was beating heavily—she did not know why. She picked up the top letter. No, it wasn't the last she had from Jane. Then Mother had been in her letters. Mother had read them. Mother knew Jane had posed for the figure. Jane had talked about it in that letter. The letter was gone. Mother had it. Mother had this friendship in her hands now, like the little chunk of clay (244).

Laura mourns the idea that her mother has now tried to take control of her life. Her mother has taken a letter and probably destroyed it in an attempt to destroy the possibility that her daughter could be a woman 'like Jane Harris' and other women like Jane, who according to Mrs. Deen, "are unnatural, they're like vultures—women like that... they do terrible thinks to young girls"(243). Mrs. Deen mongrelizes Jane Harris. Mrs. Deen thinks of Jane the same way that community thinks of the black race or anyone who does not or cannot adhere to a white standard of conformity, as other, as evil, and as below human. As much as Alma Deen wants her daughter to be educated and free from Maxwell, she does try to keep Laura within the boundaries of white social conformity.
Mrs. Deen thinks that she is protecting her daughter and re-directing her along the path of the proper white woman by destroying the evidence of her friendship with Jane. This only makes Laura feel more confused and distraught over the realization that her life is not her own, as her mother expresses praxeological dominance over Laura and severs her relationship with Jane Harris. “Laura knew. It was as if, having once nourished Laura within her body, she now claimed an equal right to feed upon her whom she had brought to life”(244). Laura, as daughter, is the indentured servant of her mother. Any attempt for Laura to develop female relationships outside of her mother is deemed “unnatural.” Laura is then subject to Alma Deen’s imposition of the proper female image upon her daughter, unlike Dottie, who attempted to put all of her eggs in the Deen family basket, finds herself alone sitting only beside her mother at Tracy’s funeral. Dottie has no relationships outside of her family and the Deen family—before Tracy’s death. Now, Dorothy is back to being alone. Back to being child-identified in the eyes of her parents and the town, as an unmarried woman. Perhaps this is what Laura meant when she observes that Dorothy looked so bereaved. Dorothy’s existence was male identified and now with the death of Tracy, it was over.

It is a losing battle for the women of Maxwell and it is extending to Laura. On one hand she is encouraged to go to college. On the other hand, she is expected to carry on specific and careful relationships probably not with women (again, that could appear unnatural) but relationships that will lead Laura closer toward a man to marry her. And so, Laura mourns for herself in the night and her refusal to end the woman identified bonds that she has created on her own, ideas which anger her mother and threaten to disgrace her family.
Laura’s relationship with Jane Harris also reflects Lillian Smith’s personal voice in the novel. As an independent woman who identifies herself as lesbian and yet spent much of her adult life tending to the needs of her family. Smith understands this conflict. Family and personal identity are opposing forces for the author and the women in her text.

In “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism,” the author, Bonnie Zimmerman explores the history of lesbian feminist literary criticism and challenges the opinions of the canon of feminist literature and criticism. In her argument and search for a definition of lesbian literature, Zimmerman discusses Lillian Faderman’s work, “Surpassing the Love of Man: Romantic Friendship and Love Between From the Renaissance to the Present” in which she postulates:

“Lesbian” describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. (Faderman in Zimmerman 2347).

In Strange Fruit Smith does not create super-characters who rise above the confines of oppression. Instead, she shows how each character is oppressed in this/her own way. Laura experiences the oppression of a woman forced to hide her natural identity and conform to the cookie cutter identity that women of her race and socio-economic status are supposed to fit.

Instead of a conventional life that her mother expects her to have, Laura’s life is filled with moments of happiness and honesty followed by shame and uncertainty. Not
uncertainty about herself as much as uncertainty about why anything she should feel toward another person, another woman would be wrong.

Yes, you loved her and wanted to be with her. And now Mother was labeling it with those names that the dean of women at college had warned you about. Yes, you knew. You knew and you did not know. Your mother knew and did not know. The dean of women knew and did not know. But you also knew if Mother made an issue if she labeled this feeling for Jane with those names, there’d be no more feeling...(246).

Without saying anything specifically, Smith uses Laura’s uncertainty and absence of words as a springboard to questions not only why Laura’s choices should be considered so evil when it comes from a place of love, respect, and admiration. Returning to Maxwell, to the Deen family home makes Laura aware of everything that she must conceal just to exist within the confines of her family, of the south, of life as woman in the 1920’s. And yet she can only express these things to herself at night and in the dark, in solitude, the place that is sacred and safe and at the same time filled with the perils of attempts to be honest with herself despite her family’s opinions and expectations.

Laura knows about her brother and Non Anderson. She knows that her brother has a way of using women to make him feel better about himself and that he has a façade to use in front of his family. However, Laura interprets Tracy’s ability to employ many faces with pity. What Laura does not see is that her brother uses Non Anderson, and white girl who will feel sorry for him to boost his self-esteem. In this way, Laura has already succumbed to the perils of southern social tradition as she makes excuses for her brother until his death.
She had been awakened in the night by the words, *He's free!* Winging through her mind, like something that flies across your face in the dark. And in her sleep she had turned on him, hating, and had screamed at her dead brother. Lying there half awake, she had felt confused, believing that he had deliberately died, to keep her at home. She knew she could not believe this, and yet nothing else would enter her mind. She had not slept again. She had grown oppressed and frightened.

(318).

Laura will not be able to return to college. Her life has been completely altered because of her brother. Tracy's murder marks the reality that Laura will now be further enslaved to her parents and the following exemplifies her jealousy and confusion at Tracy's ability to escape as well as the foreshadowing of her own stagnancy and battle to avoid the epistemic ideology of Maxwell.

Laura becomes another victim of Maxwell by the time of Tracy's funeral. "That girl Nonnie must have known him so much better than any of them. It's queer to think of a colored girl knowing your brother better than you do. Why had she killed him? (321). Although she may have held the potential to be one of the few women out of Maxwell to see beyond the shards of hatred and dehumanization in the town, Laura becomes part of what she had earlier hated. The irony is that Laura feels closer to Jane Harris than to her family. However, once she succumbs to the fact that she will not be able to leave Maxwell for a while, Laura becomes focused on race and slips closer to the roots of the southern society that created her.

The only bit of ambiguity lies in that Laura will now live in the same town as Jane Harris. Laura may carry on a life similar to her brothers one shrouded in utter silence. As
Zimmerman goes on to say in her discussion of defining lesbian texts, in her article, that part of the problem with defining or even imbuing a text as lesbian or women centered is: the problem of silence. One of the most pervasive themes in lesbian criticism is that women-identified writers, silenced by a homophobic and misogynistic society, have been forced to adopt coded and obscure language and internal censorship (2347).

*Strange Fruit* is a novel heavily encoded and obscured in language and personal censorship of the characters, censorship of a race, a sexual orientation, and a life outside of the traditional south. Any women centered relationships outside of mother/daughter are condemned.

As Tracy’s sister and one of the few characters aware of Tracy’s relationship with Non, she is most directly affected by her brother’s attempts to mobilize his male sanctioned privilege. Sadly, Tracy is never reprimanded for taking advantage of any woman in the text. While Mrs. Deen and Laura Deen may have opinions on his actions, he is never ostracized for his choices the way Laura is. In the end, even Non is looked upon with disdain and blamed by Laura for Tracy’s death. The lines of truth are skewed. Life and truth are two very separate notions and impossible to achieve. Laura’s own confusion and disdain with her life and position cause her to embody hatred for Non.

**Section III: Non Anderson**

Non Anderson’s relationship with Tracy Deen is largely predicated on how Tracy embodies or interprets Non’s skin color. To the reader, Smith wastes no time revealing to the audience that Non is exceptionally light skinned. She is introduced with immediate
objectification; everything about the way she looks is called into question as though she usurped her appearance from a white woman.

tall and slim and white in the dusk...white boys whistled softly when she walked down the street, and said low words and rubbed the back of their hands across their mouths, for Nonnie Anderson was something to look at twice, with her soft black hair blowing off her face, and black eyes set in a face that God knows by right should have belonged to a white girl (1).

Smith begins her description of Non Anderson by paralleling race and education. Brief pontification of Non’s skin color is intermingled with the information that she, as a member of the Anderson family, has even “been to college” (1). Everything about Non Anderson’s skin color being light and soft and described in relation to a white girl’s immediately distributes the racial framework and opinion female skin color in the novel. If Non as a light skinned black woman is light and soft, what does that make her darker female counterparts but darker and harder than Non. And what of the white women who are lighter and softer than she? How is Non to exist in this stratification? Furthermore, what of Non’s ‘college education’ how will it contribute to her existence in the south?

Hortense Spiller, in the article, “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor” discusses the idea of the “Tragic Mulatto/a” a character created through literary existence as the product of the middle ground between the white race and the black race. Spiller explains, “created to provide a middle ground of latitude between “black” and “white,” the customary and permissible binary agencies of the national adventure, mulatto being, as a neither/nor proposition…”(301). A character, not self named but referred to by the race who labels to delineate the color of skin and the value of skin color. From the
beginning of the novel Smith asks the reader to look at Non through white eyes and to appropriate the ideas of otherness onto her in the fashion of the south. It is in doing this that the contemporary reader may begin to feel conflict. Non is a peaceful, intelligent young woman, in love with boy who is taking advantage of her. Non lives among Maxwell, or white town and colored town where race is appropriated by the whiteness of Maxwell. Alterity colors the landscape of *Strange Fruit*.

Bess, Laura, and Dorothy grapple with Non Anderson and Tracy Deen’s relationship—why does Dorothy wait blindly for Tracy, why does Non know Tracy better than Laura did, and why does Non wait for this Tracy who will only replace her one day with a white girl—these questions are lamented over but never answered. Meanwhile, Non and Tracy creep quietly through back woods in the night in whispers that long descended from the exploitation of slave cabins and masters of a much less romanticized tradition. And much in the fashion of brutalized southern traditions, the white man’s desire for a black woman seems to be as strong as the white man’s desire to lynch a black man.

Before ending the discussion of this novel, it is imperative to examine the use of skin color as a embodiment of the traditions of exploitation in the south. An exploitation of women qualified on the shades of their skin. Eroticized by the shades of their skin in a cycle of race stratification that ends not with the last page of *Strange Fruit* but continues with the conception of Non and Tracy’s child.

The first page of the novel begins with a description of Non Anderson, predicated on her skin tone, “tall and slim and white in the dusk...” (1). Smith carries Non Anderson’s skin color like a torch throughout the novel, illuminating the traditions of
desire and exploitation of those who seek to objectify Non’s womanhood on the basis of her light skin. It would be an act of blindness to not discuss Non’s position as a mulatta woman in Strange Fruit. Hortense Spiller argues the concept of the mulatto/a in the article, “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor,” as a creation used to “provide a middle ground of latitude between “black” and “white,”[…] the mulatto/a embodied an alibi, an excuse for “other/otherness” that the dominant culture could not (cannot now either) appropriate or wish away. An accretion of signs that embody the unspeakable” (301). Therefore, Tracy Deen’s relationship with Non Anderson could serve as a progression, from the white slave master exploiting the slave woman to the Southern boy, separated from the rigors of chattel slavery but affected by it’s the heavily rooted traditions that his fore-masters ingrained in the south, he is still taught to objectify and exoticize black women. However, the exploitation of the fore-masters who proceeded him have left in their wake, the creation of yet another race of women to other and exploit. The mulatta/o woman, the symbol, the embodiment of all in the south that cannot be made to disappear, the indelible mark of chattel slavery on the black race who continues to be othered.

According to Spiller’s idea of the “alibi” Tracy Deen, as a product of his southern environment had no choice but Non. Non represents the ideal middle, for the white man, she is the light skinned black woman. She is educated. She is kind. And unfortunately the white man sees her as accessible to only him, as an object to be lusted after but much in the fashion of the characters, never spoken of directly. As Johnson’s argument, observed earlier, silence of the characters dictates their own emotional and physical oppression and stagnancy within their environment. Non’s skin color or the division of skin color in
general, between white town and colored town embodies the southern racial stratification. Non, as a light skinned black woman, then continues to embody what Spiller refers to as “the unspeakable.” As a matter of fact, so unspeakable, that it does not exceed an internal though much less a whisper in Strange Fruit.

The space that Non Anderson embodies can first be read in two ways. One, Non Anderson is a gullible and foolish young girl lost among her family when she falls victim to the philandering, pouting charm of the troubled Tracy Deen, who failed at being Maxwell’s golden boy. Secondarily, Non Anderson can be read as the embodiment of the new south. As a girl, who unfortunately does not see color or the wake of chaos and death that her “color-less” relationship ignites. Does this ability to not see the differences make her blind? Non embodies the “alibi.” She is the result of lies and deception. Non embodies the space of black and white, Spiller refers to as “the false opposition of cultural traits that converge on the binary distribution of “black” and “white” (302). Non’s light skin, is undeniably mulatta.

Although, this is one of the things that Non never speaks aloud, that Non’s family never utters, as mulatta, Non is not only Tracy’s desire of otherness. Non is known by Maxwell because she is noticed by Maxwell. Maxwell lusts her after. Non is lusted after by the men of Maxwell who, “whistled softly when she walked down the street, and said low words and rubbed the back of their hands across their mouths, for Nonnie Anderson was something to look at twice”(1). Non is regularly over sexualized/exploited because of her skin color her gender, and her being. She is decreased to nothing more than something that white men want. Why they want Non is rarely said. However, according to Spiller, it is implied into embodied life. The fact that Non is light skinned is almost
unspeakable because it represents the otherness that the white race sort of imposed onto the black race.

To simply refer to Non as black or “colored” as more frequently said in the novel, moves Non into the framework of a black embodied space. It inflicts definitive race onto her. To white town, to Maxwell, that infliction is imperative. It is the thing that maintains that stratification and the boundaries. It is the thing that even kept Tracy Deen interested as he was taking something outside of his boundaries, outside of his reach of whiteness. Ironically, to the white men of the novel, nothing is out of their reach, therefore making the continuation of othering black women through the stratification of their skin shade.

Smith continues to stratify the novel by color as she makes Maxwell synonymous with “White Town” and “Colored Town” nameless. The novel has a rising progression of animosity that is hinged on the names of the towns purely as the reflections of the people who live in them, as though, people are not individual they are parts of larger beasts. There are the “white-town” beasts and the “colored town” beasts that come clashing together in a crescendo of animosity during the final pages of the novel, with the lynching of Henry, as clashing of the alterical dimensions.

Todorov’s breakdown of alterity accommodates the perception of race as White town or Maxwell questions Non Anderson and Colored town in Strange Fruit. Beginning with the first, axiological level, “the other is good or bad, I love or do not love him, or ... he is my equal or my inferior (for there is no question that I am good and that I esteem myself”), the town of Maxwell outlines that the other is not “good” based on a combination of skin color and humanity. The other is only “good” for domestic servitude, as both Bess and Non Anderson are domestic servants. The inhabitants of Colored Town are Maxwell’s
inferior, so inferior as a matter of fact, that the very town which lies parallel to Maxwell
goes nameless and is signified only by the skin color of its inhabitants.

By the same right, Colored refers to Maxwell as White town. There is a race war
in the names of the towns that Non and Tracy travel between. Perhaps implying that the
animosity and racial explosion upon Tracy’s death has been culminating long before the
murder of Tracy Deen. If colored town is the opposite of white town and Non Anderson
lives in colored town and works in white town she will never be esteemed with the
admiration of a white woman. Instead, white town as an enigma, an object of desire and
an object of disgust looks her upon. Todorovs’s praxeological level of otherness explains
“the placing of distance or proximity between oneself and an imagined other—“I
embrace the other’s values... I identify the other with myself, I impose my own image
upon him”(305). Non Anderson, like the rest of Colored Town fails to relay the image
that White Town wants to see. White Town does not want to see people living in peace
among each other. People happy with their faith and families in a neighboring town.
White Town wants the fearful as a neighbor. They do not want to humanize Colored
Town. To do this, White Town would have to accept that they have acted inhumanly, that
they have sinned and hurt people.

Maxwell wants a town that is there to serve them. Much in the way that Tracy
wants Non to be available to him. It was this desire to objectify Non that led to his
murder. As Non’s brother Ed, acts out in enraged protection of his sister and the
boundaries between the towns momentarily collapse into one chaotic and bloody clash of
self purgation which serves to support Spillers outline of Todorov’s final, epistemic level
of otherness, “I know or am ignorant of the other’s identity...of course there is no
absolute here, but and endless gradation between the lower of higher states of knowledge”(305), on the back drop of Tracy Deen’s funeral, an innocent life is taken to justify the death of a dishonest white boy. Henry is lynched.

The “endless gradation between the lower and higher states of knowledge” occurs during the ritual of the lynching. The men of Maxwell gather together to plan their attack at the incarcerated Henry. In this instance, lower and higher states of knowledge undulate between Colored Town and White Town in a battle for reparation as Sam, the only black man in this room of white men attempts to speak out for his people and alert the white man to the states of knowledge necessary to complete the act of lynching. The hatred and fury involved vastly outweighs any crime. Finally, it does not become just a way for the white man to punish the black man. It morphs even further in the bowels of morality. It becomes the tool of the white man. To maintain the perception that he does maintain the higher state of knowledge, or virtual, intellectual, socio-economic knowledge, regardless of how illogical.

Sam Perry is the only black character who speaks directly to the white men of Maxwell prior to Henry’s lynching during which Smith encapsulates the ongoing conflict between town, race, and hatred against the back drop of an evangelical revival in which people will come from all over Maxwell to save their souls, Sam attempts to tap a moral vein of the white race, “That’s right. White man and brown. Respectable white folks don’t like to get mixed up in things like this. No. And respectable colored folks don’t either. So we shut our eyes, and you shut your eyes, I shut my eyes and-” (339). Sam’s statement to his white colleague Mr. Harris, in an effort to stop the lynching and the mob mentality that has been abusing Colored Town, searching houses and instilling fear, tries
to appeal to a common level of dislike for lynching. Sam attempts to tap into the social respectability associated with people who are against lynching. However, no one will open their eyes. No one Sam speaks to will look beyond color and right and wrong, later on “a thin spiral of smoke could now be seen rising against the late afternoon sky” (344).

With the lynching of Henry, an innocent man is murdered for the reparation of a corrupted white man in the town’s first lynching in “ten years” (322). I think what Smith tries to achieve by culminating race, religion, and the lynching in one deft crescendo at the end of the novel is to represent the sporadic, impulsive nature of the Maxwell as a white beast and all of Colored Town as its prey.

Lynching, the execution of a black man by a white gang, the sheer imposition of white upon black is an act of rape, as Weigman’s idea of Rape being sexualized violence.

Each race is ignorant to the suffering of the other. Each race is blind to the identity of the other and seeks only to “other” the race with which it is unfamiliar. Any epistemic knowledge of the other would require White Town to humanize Colored Town, to remove the identifying names that signify no identity beyond the prejudicial associations indicated according to skin color. “Identities” created by slave masters and slave ships, identities that are all supposition and no fact, yet, heavy enough to blind people with history. Furthermore, lynching was commonly exercised violence in an effort to potentially protect white women from the barbarity of black men. The logic behind this being for example, is that if someone could kill Tracy Deen, a respectable white boy, what would stop him from raping a deified, innocent white woman?

Lillian Smith further punctuates the lynching by its timing from the last lynching the fact that after ten years the town could form a mob and lynch a man as though they
never stopped is pure terror. Despite the laws of the Anti Lynching Organizations throughout the north and south and the federal acts created to ban lynching throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the work of Ida B. Wells’s Anti Lynching Campaign who set out in the 1890’s to investigate every lynching she could, and uncovered in the path the “significant number of interracial liaisons associated with the number of lynchings” (Giddings 28) to the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) for which Smith wrote, the act itself lurks like the embodiment of the white beast waiting to inflict hatred and fear for nourishment.

In a discussion by Paula Giddings on the history of Lynching movements in her book When and Where I Enter, she postulates that the act of lynching serves as yet another means of feminine subjugation. Most lynchings were performed as a means of “protecting white women” by punishing black men who served as threats. Giddings observes the early feminist reaction of Jessie Daniel Ames to this idea of lynching as an act of chivalry, “White men hold that White women are their property [and] so are Negro women” (Ames in Giddings 207). Giddings goes on to quote Lillian Smith as describing the ASWPL’s ideas as a effort for women to alert men to the fact that “women understood that they were being used as a shield for White men’s “race-economic exploitation” (207). In other words, the white man will use lynching in the name of protecting women but really as a method to further subjugate black men if not the black race as a whole.

Smith ends Strange Fruit, in the midst of a microcosm of southern reconstruction. After a night of terror, fear and subjugation what is left in the light of day? What is there to see but the smoke and tree as steeples of white supremacy? Yet, I ask to read the end
of *Strange Fruit* as a testament to the work of women throughout the novel, whose silence and fear did not stop them. Who did not fall victim to the intimidation of the white man in a tumultuous night.

Smith ends the novel with three women. Walking in silence with a clear view of their paths. Bess, Non, and Dessie, another young girl from Colored town, walk to work with the idea that everything would be the same—as it always was”(371). This ending can be read two ways. The first is that yes, the black woman will move on and survive amidst the fear and intimidation that the white community may spread from time to time. But that is life, sad and disempowering. Everyone trapped once again in silent stagnancy. However, the second reading incorporates Non’s baby, not as a continuation of other, but as the ultimate silent character, mulatto, limited and silent for the time being. Much like in the novel, every moment is fleeting. Every dimension holds the potential to briefly collide with another in an endless spiraling of awareness and ignorance, voice and voicelessness.
Works Cited/Consulted


--- "The Tragic Mulatta: Neither/Nor—Towards an Alternative Model."


