


Critical Essays on the Writings of

**LILLIAN
SMITH**

Edited by Tanya Long Bennett



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CHAPTER 1

Mind Where You Puts Yo Feet: A Study of Southern Boundaries in Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*

—*Tanya Long Bennett*

They can't kill you efn dey don strike you. Member dat. Jus mind where you puts yo feet.
All of you, you hear!

—Tillie Anderson (*Strange Fruit* 22)

Nonnie, Bess, and Eddie Anderson remember well the lessons they learned from their mother, Tillie, as African American children growing up just outside Maxwell, Georgia, in Black Town. Although when “listening to her words, [they] thrust their roots more firmly into that soil out of which they had come” (23), they also absorb her subtle warnings about where black children can stand and where they cannot.¹ Lillian Smith’s 1944 novel *Strange Fruit* boldly explores the taboos of 1920s small-town Georgia life, unveiling the violence that underlies often neurotic relationships within communities like the fictional Maxwell, Georgia, thought to be based on Smith’s birthplace, Jasper, Florida. An adamant desegregationist, Smith argued that southern slavery and the Jim Crow laws that followed it had deformed all who participated in them, black as well as white. Further, her vision of a healthier and nobler humanity demanded that *all* social ideologies be continually investigated to avoid similarly dehumanizing dynamics.

Tracing the interactions of Maxwell residents, *Strange Fruit* acknowledges that people desire both a safe and secure home for themselves and their loved ones and the ability to engage freely in the world at large. On the face of it, the two dreams are not mutually exclusive, but, Smith emphasizes, pursuit of these impulses is inevitably complicated by economic and psychological factors that, if not recognized as such, can coalesce into rigid social structures positioning these two goals in opposition to each other. As the novel illustrates, such structures are often perpetuated under the guise of moral and religious codes and as natural law, and the neuroses that shape them are the more dangerous for being hidden and hence unarticulated. In most towns, however, these systems manifest themselves visibly in physical boundaries. Although these boundaries are often accepted, initially, as a way to provide order and stability to human society, they can result in stifling environments that stunt rather than nourish and protect. Under such circumstances, people of the lower castes, such as the black Andersons, as well as higher-status community members like the white Deens, become “strange fruit.”

This chapter examines the boundaries of *Strange Fruit*'s fictional Maxwell to better understand the impact of segregation on the lives of the town's inhabitants. On its face, Maxwell appears to be a tightly knit community of good-natured, caring people, living and working together in near harmony; however, viewed as a map, the town reveals systematic “divide and conquer” practices that keep residents in their places, often at the price of their mental well-being and sometimes even of their lives. Middle-class white residential neighborhoods and white-owned downtown businesses serve as the orientation point for the town as a whole, with Black Town homes skirting Maxwell's city limits, alleyways linking the two communities in a symbiotic economic relationship.

Smith's childhood hometown of Jasper sheds some light on the Maxwell that she portrays in the novel. Named after the Revolutionary War veteran William Jasper, the Florida community was settled in the early 1800s by white migrants primarily from Georgia and

South Carolina, some bringing slaves. For many years, these settlers fought with native Seminoles over the territory, but in 1858, with US government support, the settlers secured their stake, forcing the remaining Seminoles to relinquish the territory and retreat either to Oklahoma reservations or sparsely inhabited Big Cypress swampland. After the Civil War, the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway was completed and a depot built in Jasper just north of the town's center. The economic development that followed gravitated toward the railroad depot, shifting the town's orientation in the direction of commercial activity. While Jasper has survived the Great Depression and other recessions since the 1920s, like other small towns, it has had to negotiate economic challenges such as an interstate highway that bypasses the town rather than drawing travelers into its city limits. The town's official boundaries were expanded in 2000, for example, to incorporate the Hamilton County Correctional Institute in an effort to sustain Jasper's economic viability ("Jasper, Florida"). This small Florida town's cartographic history illuminates the complicated ways that location, civic status, and economic forces can intersect to shape the lives of a region's residents.

Smith's rendering of Maxwell reflects this point powerfully. Central to Maxwell is College Street, where high-status white families live, and on which some run businesses, like the Deens' Corner Drugstore. In the alley behind College Street, the garbage of the stores is piled to preserve clean and tidy storefronts, and the town's black residents generally traverse this parallel "Back Street" rather than College Street's sidewalks. On Back Street, Salamander's offers a lunch counter to black customers who cannot patronize the Deens' drugstore. At the end of Back Street, Brown's Hardware Store and Pug Pusey's Supply Store sit near Maxwell's water tank, and nearby, freight is hauled in and out of the area on trains. Although technically part of White Town, these border areas are characterized by racially mixed commercial interactions that enable a complex economy to function: African American delivery boys come and go, and workers purchase items needed for turpentine farms and lumber mills, money passing

through the hands of rich and poor, black and white, alike. On the outer edges of Maxwell lie the town's ball grounds, one for whites and one for blacks. In these male sporting venues, the classes of each race mix more freely than in restaurants, offices, and churches, though black and white men still do not play with or against one another on these grounds.

Walking toward home from town, the Andersons pass the ball fields, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Evergreen Cemetery—where white dead are buried—then “an ancient row of cedars” (13), and finally the house of the mentally ill, white Miss Ada, before coming to Black Town, the entrance to which is marked by a picket gate. While the home of Miss Ada and her elderly mother is now in a ramshackle state, its situation at the end of the “ancient row of cedars” near the cemetery suggests that her family at one time held a prominent place in the community.

Although Maxwellians not identifying as white do not live in White Town, except in rare cases, there are recognizable class boundaries in Black Town itself. Near the edge of the swamp, both beautiful and haunted, the Andersons live in a run-down two-story house just beyond the picket gate and Miss Ada's house; in fact, Miss Ada watches Bess's son, Jackie, when Bess is working as a maid for the Browns. Since Miss Ada is considered crazy, the townspeople do not find this racial overlap offensive, though many of them do consider the Spelman-educated Anderson sisters “biggety” (1). Farther out of town, we find the Negro Quarters and the mill settlements populated by poor white workers, who often compete with their black counterparts for the manual-labor jobs on farms and mills.

Though Maxwell's borders are relatively fixed during the 1920s time frame of *Strange Fruit*, some movement of whites in Black Town, and vice versa, does occur. The townspeople understand that many white Maxwell men have lovers in Black Town. Middle-class white men generally walk the paths of this section without fear, since their families and white associates often employ the people who live there. Black men and women can walk in College Street and its side neighborhoods, as

well, but only for work. Each morning, Bess, Nonnie, and other women in maids' uniforms make the trek to the homes in this area to clean house, cook, and take care of white children. As an exception to the rules associated with these geographic markers, Henry McIntosh, who is black, lives in the servants' cabin behind the Deens' big yellow house, as his mother and father did before him. When his parents, Mamie and Ten, faced the decision of whether to leave thirteen-year-old Henry to live in the cabin or take him with them to Baxley to farm cotton, Mamie argued for leaving him with the Deens so that he could go to school. Ten's expression of frustration about the arrangement reveals the unique tensions of living across the line from one's own social group: "Hate livin in Deen's back yard. Told you a hundard time it'd be better in the quarters where we'd be free to do as we like. I don want ma boy brung up wid no white boy—don want none of it!" (113). Yet, attached to the humble abode as the only home he has ever known, and to Tracy Deen as a sort of surrogate brother, Henry stays and remains houseboy to the Deens even after becoming a grown man.

Smith's story of the South's "strange fruit" arises from a plot involving two young lovers, Nonnie Anderson and Tracy Deen. Although Nonnie is pregnant with Tracy's child, he is ultimately unable to sustain his commitment to her in the face of pressures from his family and friends to take the "right path" and marry the esteemed Dorothy Pusey instead (199–200). Out of guilt, Tracy pays his friend-servant Henry to marry Nonnie and, as a result of the insult implied in such a transaction, is shot and killed by Nonnie's infuriated brother Ed. Foreseeing local outrage over the murder of a white man in Black Town, Ed's sister Bess arranges with their friend Sam Perry to get Ed out of town quickly and quietly, and rather than waiting for an investigation or a trial, a white mob of Maxwell locals lynches and burns the easily targeted Henry for the murder. This plot, tracing the movement of black and white characters around and across Maxwell's boundaries, illustrates well how these borders serve both literally and symbolically to determine the paths of the novel's characters and, ultimately, to deform them psychologically.

In *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Twentieth-Century America*, Jay Garcia notes that although the lyrics of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" refer to a vigilante hanging, and Smith's novel culminates in a lynching, Smith employed this title to emphasize the deformed "personalities that [result] from 'racist culture'" (117), including vigilantes and onlookers, whites as well as blacks. Investigating the causes of this personality distortion, Garcia recognizes Smith's apt portrayal of "rigid geographical demarcations of the color line" (117), both a reflection of the physical reality of the 1920s South and an effective metaphor for the psychological color line that ruled the lives of southerners, compromising their mental health and their very humanity.

On a globe, Maxwell would not seem to be the center of anything, really. In the southeast corner of the United States, the town's place on the earth is not a common orientation point or destination for travelers. For young men like Ed Anderson and Tracy Deen, fighting in Europe during World War I, the perspective offered from across the Atlantic is enlightening. Ed has, as a result of leaving Maxwell and using his talents for the US government, developed into a confident and dignified man, disdainful of anyone who considers him otherwise. Disgusted by Maxwell's continued segregation and the degradation it causes, he argues that Nonnie should return with him to Washington, DC, to find more dignified work as he has.

Tracy found psychological freedom from Maxwell's inflexible mind-set during his time in France, as well: "Months in the Ruhr Valley left you time to think. Cut off from everything that makes it hard to think at home, it was easier" (48). Here, beyond the mental and behavioral conditioning of Maxwell, he realizes that he is in love with Nonnie, the lovely young black woman that he has known most of his life. His love provides him with a new point by which to orient himself: "He saw her, tender and beautiful, holding in her eyes her pliant spirit, in the movement of her body, her easy right words, low, deep voice, all that gave his life meaning" (50). Back in Maxwell with Nonnie, beginning to feel the tentacles of whiteness tighten around

him once more, Tracy proposes, offhandedly, that he and Nonnie might move back to France together, suggesting for Nonnie a new notion of existence: "When he said the word something happened to Nonnie's face and he was startled—as if he had lighted ten thousand candles with one small half-thought-out word" (57).

Nonnie's attachment to Tracy is based, at least in part, on the broadened worldly perspective that the relationship opens up for her. Not only did he protect her from the advances of little white boys when she was a child, but he also talked to her about the world "outside" hers. She strives to describe for Tracy his effect on her: "You told me about the other side of the world—geography—I didn't know a thing about that" (137). Although Tracy flunked out of college, his experience and his understanding of books and ideas, nurtured generously by his parents and teachers, fire Nonnie's imagination in a way that even her Spelman education did not. It is interesting to note that Spelman administrators were upset with Smith at her suggestion, in *Strange Fruit*, that graduates of the historically black college for women might return to their small towns and become servants and, worse, illicit lovers of local white men (Loveland 72). Yet opportunities for Spelman's female graduates were definitely limited in the 1920s, and women like Nonnie and Bess would have faced disproportionate challenges, economic and otherwise, even after obtaining a much-desired college degree. Smith herself noted, defending her portrayal of these characters, "Unfortunately, under a system of segregation and racial discrimination, a college education does not solve the Negro's problems. . . . It is not the full answer to the Negro's problem, and does not, in its present form, solve the white man's problems either" ("Lillian Smith Answers Some Questions about *Strange Fruit*" 128). Nonnie might reasonably consider Tracy's momentary fantasy of taking her back to France with him as a promising possibility for a more fulfilling life. In spite of Tracy's failure to follow through with the idea, his role in providing her a glimpse of unrestricted psychological terrain secures him her devotion. Eileen Boris asserts that *Strange Fruit* "dramatizes not only the ways that

segregation perverted bodily integrity, but also how the sexual defined the quest for economic, social, and political rights” (5). Though some critics have expressed disappointment that Nonnie misses the supposed opportunities her degree would offer, she perhaps considers Tracy, albeit subconsciously, as a liaison through whom she could more fully engage with the world.

Ed, Tracy, and Nonnie all imagine a freer existence outside the confines of their Georgia hometown, but Maxwell has a strong hold on the novel’s characters. Its centrality to their psychic maps overrides its obscure global position and their desire to escape it. Maxwell is home for them. When Ed expresses dismay that his sisters would stay in this “dump” (31) even after their mother has died, Bess tries to articulate for herself why she does so:

Moss . . . trailing in your face when you’re little . . . you’d make great pillows of it, flop down in them, feeling luxurious and rich. Oak trees you couldn’t reach around. . . . Thickets of yellow jessamine . . . and violets . . . fly-catchers in low marshy places, looking so pretty, spreading their yellow fingers through the grass, smelling so bad when you put your nose to them. . . . That’s the way you feel about the place where you were born. Always looking for it. Always staying or coming back, searching for the you that you left there. (36–37)

Ed is resolute in his refusal to live in the Georgia town where he grew up, feeling distinctly diminished when he is there. Steven A. Reich describes the Great Black Migration from the rural South to cities such as New York, Chicago, and Washington during and after World War I. “Race was,” according to Reich, “obviously the common denominator in determinations to migrate, but motives were often filtered through the gender identities of black men and women. The pernicious characteristics of Jim Crow race relations—disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic marginalization—militated against African American men’s claims to the status of manhood as it was defined by the dominant culture” (203). Ed’s aversion to Maxwell