Literary Obscenities
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Published by Penn State University Press

Bachman, Erik M.
Literary Obscenities: U.S. Case Law and Naturalism after Modernism.
Penn State University Press, 2018.
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During the first half of the twentieth century, the ability of writing to make unruly claims on our bodies preoccupied judges, jurists, authors, and critics involved in debates over ongoing revisions to the definition of and tests for legal obscenity in the United States. At the same time that modernist writing was challenging fiction and poetry as they had been created hitherto, state and appellate courts began undermining the grounds on which books could be prosecuted for their corruptive moral influences and salacious bodily appeals. Putting into dialogue obscenity case law’s crisis of legitimation and modernism’s crisis of representation, Literary Obscenities argues that “obscene modernism” helps us to account for the cultural logic of a period in which the meaning, identity, and very existence of obscene writing itself seemed to be evaporating. “Modernism,” it should be noted, does not refer to fundamentally subversive, shocking, or disruptive texts here. Instead, it encompasses a widely dispersed set of discursive practices that are marked by concerns regarding the conditions of possibility for art as such. At the same time that these practices contributed to major formal innovations and to a further widening of aesthetic sensibilities, long-held certainties about legal obscenity began to wither under closer examination, and efforts to explain how books could be judged obscene appeared to become more and more Sisyphean with each passing year. In short, the expansion of what potentially counted as a text worthy of artistic or literary judgments under modernism coincided with the contraction of what could possibly be deemed proscribably obscene in a U.S. court of law. At issue in these obscenity cases was nothing less than the capacity of mute words to get off the page and affect readers in the world in ways that could not be fully controlled, especially in the
formation of their civic comportments and social identities. Depending on which precedents a given judge cited from the case law, however, obscene books either posed too much of a threat or no threat at all. Accordingly, proscribed writers such as Wyndham Lewis, Erskine Caldwell, and Lillian Smith responded to contemporary obscenity trials by interrogating the power of words to take on embodied dimensions even as they continued to grapple with the manner in which human interests, capacities, and self-knowledge nevertheless get fostered or distorted by the affecting appeals made by putatively obscene texts.

Furthermore, ambivalence regarding what constituted obscenity in the first place extended to the realm of social relationships affected by it. Obscenity trials and the texts prosecuted in them were perennial news items and topics of debate in this period, as were the evolving standards for what constituted obscenity, which oftentimes shifted year to year, state to state, and court to court. Just as the definition of obscenity was up for grabs, so too were its broader effects on readers, who were variously depicted in case law at this time as children requiring parental oversight, women in need of male protectors, or adults able to determine what was or was not good for them. However, even those judges who treated readers of obscenity like grown-ups still did not fail to assign them a common social role: that of consumers in a market economy. I contend that all of this was not accidental, as obscenity was a conspicuously contested field through which writers and judges addressed other, even more socially pervasive aspects of writing’s effects. As *Literary Obscenities* demonstrates, the struggle to account for the libidinal efficacy of writing prominently figured in a number of period disputes, such as those concerning the manipulative use of behaviorist-informed advertising practices, shifts in cultural hierarchies between print and visual materials, and activist strategies for desegregating the Jim Crow South before the 1950s.

Just as lascivious writing carried the weight of some enormously important cultural issues, a survey of the case law on obscene books shows that the more frequent targets of obscenity prosecutions in the early twentieth-century United States were not modernist novels but literary naturalist texts such as those of Caldwell, Smith, and James T. Farrell. In this study I understand “literary naturalism” to refer to fiction that, in the words of György Lukács, “describes” life rather than “narrates” it. That is to say, it is fiction in which expansive descriptions are tacitly organized and fixed in place by the findings and methodologies of contemporary sociology, psychology, physiology, criminology, and evolutionary biology rather than by the (realist) impulse to model typical human characters and nascent forms of dynamic social action. Because early naturalist writing tended to rely heavily on these fields of scientific inquiry, many of its initial critics in the United States claimed it was robbing fiction of its own authentically literary forms, functions, and narratives. Moreover, by putatively adopting some form of determinism to present
their characters as the objects of the social and natural forces investigated by these same discourses of human knowledge, naturalist texts were widely believed to have reduced men and women to “human insects,” to use Malcolm Cowley’s expression, insofar as they reliably depicted a world in which people were more “done to” than “doing.”

Notable scholarly work of the past few decades, however, has moved our discussions of U.S. literary naturalism beyond warmed-over debates about the two cultures (literary vs. scientific) or about the coherence of determinism as a philosophy and its broader implications as a worldview. The attention devoted to literary naturalism by many notable critics aligned with New Historicism in the 1980s, for instance, shifted our focus to the ways in which U.S. naturalist fiction called into question the autonomy of literature with respect to the institutions and discourses in or alongside which it circulated. As a result, “co-optation” has increasingly replaced “determinism” as a keyword in studies of literary naturalism, and the result has been greater attention paid to complicitous relationships in naturalist works rather than to determinist subsumption pure and simple. In keeping with this, scholars and critics have since developed more nuanced conceptions of how subjectivity, will, and agency become informed (rather than wholly overmastered) by the tremendous social and natural forces set forth by naturalist fiction.

Emblematic here remains Jennifer Fleissner’s work on compulsion, which has broadened our conception of how U.S. literary naturalist texts exemplify their embodied reception in readers by representing worlds in which embodiment as such reliably takes the form of repetition, habit formation, and failure. For Fleissner, subjectivity and agency are not abolished by the routine behaviors encrusted onto the bodies to which they are attached in naturalist fiction, nor are they canceled out by the conspicuous inability of this fiction to offer shapely narratives of triumph or tragedy. Instead, literary naturalism forces us to situate such subjectivity and such agency ever and always in terms of mundane, nonlinear habits and recurring motions (e.g., those involved with cleaning or lovemaking) that do not eventuate in a sense of mastery or completion so much as they do in bodily experiences of repetition and disappointment that nevertheless constitute the only path available to us in naturalist fiction that can still perhaps lead (beyond the frame of the text itself) to mastery and completion eventually. In short, failure in the present does not foreclose the possibility of different outcomes in the future, though according to Fleissner what distinguishes naturalism from other modes of writing is that it locates this future in our bodies (where self and world interface and become meaningfully entangled), and in women’s bodies in particular.

In many respects, then, what my calling attention to the literary naturalistic qualities of early twentieth-century obscenity in the United States entails is that we reckon more expansively with failure, by which I refer both to the recurrent failure
of courts at this time to formulate adequate tests for obscenity and to the ultimate failure of fiction to be deemed proscribably obscene, even though the works by Smith, Caldwell, and Lewis examined here were indeed proscribed in courts of law for their obscenity. I would also note that this preoccupation with failure is already encoded in the title of the first chapter—“Getting Off the Page”—in which the key propositions aimed at by its wordplay are only somewhat felicitously expressed. The salacious implications of the idiomatic “get off” are easily discernible, but they badly need a preposition to make it clear that it is a prospective reader who is sexually gratifying him- or herself on (or by means of) a book rather than the leaves of the book itself that are somehow being sexually satisfied by the reader. Despite the possibility of conjuring forth bizarre visions of readers clumsily jerking off or going down on or otherwise illicitly stimulating a book somehow, someway, I have nevertheless opted to omit the preposition, not simply because “Getting Off on the Page” is a less euphonious title but more importantly because “Getting Off the Page” nevertheless does indeed succinctly express the core preoccupation of this book, which has to do with how obscenity has more or less ceased to be something readily predicable of written texts of fiction in a court of law in the United States. In this less idiomatic sense, then, obscenity in this period ceased to get off the page in the ways expected by courts hitherto (namely, by having untoward effects on the bodies and behaviors of readers in the world) and started to get off the page entirely by leaving books behind and moving on to other media (primarily visual ones), with which it is more credibly associated now than it is with writing as such. While this is an outcome that did not become codified until the end of the Supreme Court’s repeated efforts to work up a suitable set of new standards for obscenity during the second half of the twentieth century, Literary Obscenities locates formative (and, up to now, largely overlooked) sources for this eventual result in the period, cases, and works of fiction examined here.

This approach thus distinguishes itself from significant critical work on law, literature, and obscenity carried out by both literary critics and jurists, for whom quite different concerns and questions have guided much recent scholarship. On the one hand, obscenity has tended to provide many of those working in the New Modernist Studies an opportunity to reassert the subversive potentials of certain modernist texts that were creatively vivified by the tussles their respective writers had with obscenity laws and the various institutions enforcing them. On the other hand, some have used “obscene modernism” to express a deep and abiding skepticism about these transgressive potentials by drawing our attention to the ways in which such writing nonetheless ended up embodying the very sorts of interdictions and proscriptions it nominally sought to flout. For legal scholars, in contrast, questions of principle (Is obscenity even an instance of speech in the first place? Is obscenity law equipped to address the problem of moral harm that
would potentially justify the proscription of obscenity if such a thing were indeed an instance of speech?) and practice (Are obscenity prosecutions a wise use of limited institutional resources? Are the conceptions of art and literature offered in obscenity law really in line with how those two things are actually performed or created today?) have tended to predominate over the more historical and evaluative pursuits of those working in the New Modernist Studies.

The aim of this book is therefore to offer an alternative angle of vision onto early twentieth-century writing and obscenity, one that orients itself more around states of development in the reformulation of legal obscenity in this period than around the retroactive credentialing of literary modernism as either a dependably subversive or regrettably compromised set of innovative texts and compositional practices. Likewise, I am not all that interested in reading law in/as literature or literature in/as law. Instead, my concerns are with assessing the consequences of treating proscribably obscene fiction in the early twentieth century not simply as an object of obscenity case law but more importantly as its respondent, as texts that answer to the conditions and limits placed on literary writing’s efficacy by the disparate accounts and appraisals made by judges themselves in this period. In particular, what this closer attention to case law makes salient about the relationship between writing and obscenity in the United States throughout much of the past century is twofold. First, the proscription of obscenity in this period usefully indexes major shifts in contemporary cultural hierarchies that were then in the midst of slowly but surely prioritizing visual texts over written ones, a point I most fully expound in the chapter on Caldwell. When viewed from afar, the large-scale narrative of U.S. legal obscenity in the twentieth century is decidedly not a story of censorship forces heroically overcome by an elite group of modernist pioneers; instead, the tale forced on us by history is a decidedly more ambivalent one that foregrounds the wholesale neutralization of the claims that books can potentially make on bodies, and it is the U.S. literary naturalist texts of this period (rather than modernist works) that offer us a means of conceptualizing the end of book obscenity not so much as a timely victory over censorship forces but rather as the emergent recognition of the sobering and troubling possibility that reading books can no longer affect us in ways that are worth proscribing. Ever since the Supreme Court’s decision in Miller v. California (1973), after all, it is always okay not to masturbate when we read.

This brings up the second point made apparent by the story of obscene writing in the United States when it is first focalized through case law: when the libidinal potentials of books were indeed being neutralized in U.S. courtrooms in the twentieth century, this tended to be carried out by positing art and literature as autonomous modes of human expressivity, along with the aesthetic conceptions of value typically associated with those two things. Hence, the nearly century-long
effort to deproscribe obscene books in this country principally entailed the efforts of liberalizing judges, jurists, writers, publishers, and academics to separate the “literary” from the properly obscene in the eyes of judges, juries, post office employees, police officers, and customs officials. In this view, literary writing could not and cannot be obscene because truly obscene writing was not and is not properly literary, a state of affairs pithily summed up in present-day obscenity statutes exempting prurient and patently offensive books from proscription so long as they possess “serious literary value,” which, since *Miller*, has been implicitly extended to all fiction. As the first chapter shows, modernist writing and its critical reception provided the immediate occasions for the expansive aesthetic arguments offered in defense of obscene writing in the early twentieth-century United States. As indicated earlier, however, even though such aesthetic considerations now allow previously objectionable books to be disseminated to adult readers without state interference, this does not signify a triumph of enlightened liberal attitudes toward salacious and unruly writerly practices but rather a diminution of writing’s effective power in the field of social representation. Ironically, liberalization of this sort reflects a judgment over writing that has already fallen “before the law”: the demotion of writing’s capacity to affect our bodies with the sort of unsettling immediacy that various other media—such as television, film, photography, videogames, the internet, and so forth—still seem to possess with all the self-evident force of a publicly lewd man.

Consequently, if books no longer appear to affect us in the eyes of the law in the United States, then that is due in no small part to their successful neutralization on aesthetic grounds provided by modernism and its critical reception. In the twentieth century, obscene books became simply “literature,” which itself raises new terminological issues that raise all sorts of skeptical responses, beginning with the obvious question, “Well, what *is* literature, and what does it *do* anyway?” Yet despite brass-tacks questions such as this, the matter remains fairly settled for all that. We live in an age in the United States in which Stein-ese may be the best idiolect with which to convey how writing both expresses and yet holds in check its potential to make unmanageable libidinal or behavioral appeals: “Obscene books should be written and read since obscene books are literature and literature should be written and read because literature is literature and there is a difference between obscenity and literature in the character of their quality to be written and read and literature can be and ought to be written and read while obscenity cannot be read because it cannot be written anymore so it is literature that is different from obscenity anyway, meaning obscene books are not obscenity anymore just literature.” Alternatively, much like the attempts of various early twentieth-century avant-gardes to intervene violently into and qualitatively transform contemporary life, the abilities of obscene books to do much of anything in the world appear to
have become a matter of historical and antiquarian interest—matters for professors and collectors of rare books—but not anything we would want our overstuffed court system to squander its time considering.

Disenchantingly, then, the overmastering imperative in telling the story of legal obscenity, modernism, and the dull persistence of literary naturalism in the early twentieth-century United States is not to make it new, but to make it neutral. Accordingly, in place of the familiar “obscene modernism” story of transgressive modernist writing practices and their wildly successful repurposing of a variety of censorship discourses, I want to put forward instead a highly recursive narrative that looks a lot like Invasion of the Body Snatchers, an ungainly story of textual identities and readerly bodies secretly compromised, evacuated, and replaced from the inside out through shadowy interactions between obscenity case law and early twentieth-century writing that are best described in an uneasy, equivocal middle voice. One day we woke up to find our offensive, foulmouthed, philandering neighbors had become reputable suburban members of the community; books that were once dirty had been reborn as literature. This volume’s response is to elaborate how proscribed salacious writing in this period neither actively neutralized its own capacities to make unmanageable claims on readerly bodies, nor was it expressly deprived of its abilities to make such claims by heteronomous social forces. Instead, this overarching process of failure and cooptation is one in which English-language writing in the twentieth century got itself neutralized of the potential to deprave, corrupt, make prurient appeals, patently offend, or make libidinal claims of any consequence on human bodies. Whether writers and judges were ascribing too much power to the ability of printed words to ineluctably arouse the bodies of readers and incite them to action (as Lewis, Smith’s early writings, and the judges of the Massachusetts Supreme Court certainly did), or whether they were calling into question the ability of written language to do anything of note in an age increasingly suffused with and informed by visual representations instead (as Caldwell and Judge Curtis Bok did), literary obscenity was an occasion for naturalizing obscene literature: proscribably obscene writing in the early twentieth-century United States became something we could both take for granted and eventually disregard (it had become second nature, as it were, to accept that the obscenity of a book did not make it simply an obscene book) because much of that writing had situated its own unmanageable bodily appeals in terms of existing forms of human knowledge that helped us to articulate them descriptively rather than to reexperience them narratively (it had become second nature by way of literary naturalism). If modernism gives us the means of accounting for how aesthetic and literary exceptions to obscenity got articulated by judges in the early twentieth century, then literary naturalism offers us a way of conceptualizing how proscribed writing of this time got itself neutralized of the ability to act obscenely.
I would further note that two interrelated concerns have informed my selection of the obscenity cases and proscribed works discussed in the chapters that follow. First of all, I have chosen decisions and texts that exemplify the uneven and peculiar history of U.S. obscenity case law in the early twentieth century, a period in which obscenity was primarily a lower court (rather than a Supreme Court) concern. Hence, there is little sense of definite progress in the labile definitions of and tests for obscenity put forward by these lower courts between 1917 and 1950. Instead, judges seemed to be stuck returning to the same issues and precedents with little certain or lasting effect. Even District Judge John M. Woolsey's famous holistic test for obscenity in *United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses”* (1933) did not mark an advance in the deproscription of obscene books insofar as the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court had no problem using his standard to find *God’s Little Acre* (1933) and *Strange Fruit* (1944) obscene more than a decade later. Thus, it would be wrong to interpret the legal battles surrounding *Ulysses* (1922) as the end of something. Woolsey’s decision and Augustus Hand's affirmation of it in the appellate case that took place the following year are instead part of a much longer sequence of trials in which reproscribing and deproscribing tendencies are often hard to distinguish from each other when looked at up close. Consequently, the chapters on the proscribably obscene works of Lewis, Caldwell, and Smith do not organically follow from each other so much as they recursively work through the same legal precedents and deterministic processes over and over as issues connected with behaviorism, voyeurism, and racial identity formation, respectively, come to the fore in each case. In other words, as in a naturalist novel, there is no shapely overarching narrative to be told here, only the variously failed efforts of judges, writers, and jurists to come to terms with the problems named by obscenity as they reappeared in different times, places, and texts.

Second, my choice of cases and literary texts spotlights the belatedness of literary obscenity in the United States at this time. I mean “belated” in two senses. First, it was not the muckraking literary naturalism from the turn of the century that proved to be the primary target of obscenity prosecutions in this period but rather literary naturalism *after* modernism. With the exception of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), the literary naturalism being proscribed for obscenity in the years covered by this study was not comprised of the figures (Crane, Norris, London, Cahan) familiar to many of us from the customary surveys of U.S. literature. Instead, the texts that were targeted belong to what I refer to here as literary naturalism “after modernism,” with “after” doing double duty. On the one hand, it serves as an indication of imitative facility: modernist styles, techniques, concerns, and problems were available to be mimicked or “taken after,” either with great gusto, as in the early fiction of Caldwell, or ambivalently, as in the work of Smith. On the other hand, “after” serves as a marker of temporal priority: the
event of modernism had already happened by the time Farrell, Caldwell, Smith, and others commenced their careers. This is not to say that modernism was a neatly contained phenomenon that had already run its course by the early 1930s. Much valuable work on periodizing modernism (into its late modernist and, more recently, its metamodernist strands) of course attests to the ways in which it subsequently unfolded and continues to ramify down to the present. Instead, my point is simply that the proscribably obscene naturalist writers looked at here took up writing after modernism’s horizons of legibility had already been disclosed both to a broader public and to (at least a few) judges. I develop this point at length in the chapter on Lewis, who is the token modernist here and whose legal troubles with obscenity in the 1910s afford us a chance to reflect afresh on how courts of law in the United States dealt with modernism before aesthetic and literary justifications for its jarring formal features and (at times) outré contents became matters of course. I would also underscore for my readers that it is this principle of selection that has justified the otherwise conspicuous exclusion of Dreiser, An American Tragedy, and Commonwealth v. Friede (1930) in this study.

The belatedness of literary obscenity is also a preoccupation here because this period does indeed mark the beginning of the end of proscribably obscene books, if not their end as such. That is to say, despite the lack of clarity and agreement among many state and appellate courts during these decades, efforts like those of the Massachusetts Supreme Court to proscribe obscene books well into the middle of the twentieth century certainly did comprise derrière-garde actions in light of what the U.S. Supreme Court accomplished with its obscenity cases between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. However, the chapters that follow resist the temptation to present the course of obscenity case law at this earlier contested time in a teleological fashion, not least of all because the beginning of the end of legally obscene books was a period marked by too much (rather than too little) obscenity law, as the first chapter shows. Literary Obscenities, then, is partly an effort to excavate and re-present the forgotten detours, byways, and dead ends that obscenity case law took in these critical and contentious years.

In chapter 1, “Getting Off the Page,” I demonstrate how literary criticisms of naturalism illuminate debates around book obscenity in early twentieth-century U.S. case law. On the one hand, judges who wanted to continue to proscribe books for obscenity often resorted to drawing a distinction between works with redeeming “literary” value and those without it. In view of their literary qualities having been disputed since the late nineteenth century, naturalist texts proved to be a prominent target for prescriptive forces. On the other hand, the ways in which literary naturalism was believed to divest characters of agency also relate to a number of legal arguments about how obscene books deprive readers of the willpower to resist their aroused sexual or immoral urges. Objective social forces and subjective
compulsions thus hazily overlap in obscene books and literary naturalism, just as they did in the debates occasioned by both, a point I develop through a close reading of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (1932–35). As obscenity case law unfolded across the century, however, this view of the relationship between readers and salacious texts became more vexed. Instead of taking for granted the obscene efficacy of writing, tests for obscenity today tend to assume that books no longer possess any such force. Much like a character in a naturalist novel, obscene writing over the past century has gotten itself deprived of the capacity to get off the page and transgress in the world, such that novels like Samuel R. Delany’s *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012) appear on bookstore shelves rather than on court dockets. *Literary Obscenities* ventures an account of how this naturalistic muting of writing’s libidinal effectiveness took place across different modes of fictional writing (the short story and the novel) and in a variety of publication formats (little magazines, deluxe limited-edition hardcover books, and mass-market trade paperbacks) that circulated among an emblematic range of readers, from small literary coteries to the mass audiences of best seller lists.

Chapter 2, “How to Misbehave as a Behaviorist (if You’re Wyndham Lewis),” reveals that what the New York District Court found so troubling about “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” in the October 1917 issue of *The Little Review* was its preoccupation with representing obscenity not as a quality intrinsic to a text but rather as a set of culturally produced reading habits. Lewis’s World War I narrative connects a young British soldier’s ludicrously overheated readings of Thomas Hardy’s *The Trumpet-Major* (1880) to his wartime milieu, in which distinctions between man and animal appeared to be breaking down altogether. Comparing Lewis’s culture critiques of the 1920s and 1930s to the work of John B. Watson as a behaviorist psychologist and later as a successful advertising executive, I claim that for Lewis the bodily responsiveness of a reader to the printed word indexed a broader social trend whereby consumers everywhere were being reduced to well-oiled stimulus-response mechanisms by the twinned forces of behaviorism and modern advertising. “Obscenity,” in his view, was a by-product of cultural training—of a widely inculcated “art of being ruled”—not a primary datum of either “obscene works” or “depraved readers.” “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” therefore demonstrates Lewis’s hypothesis through a fictional provocation to which, as it happened, the judiciary proved adversely responsive in the 1910s, though the legal and cultural absorption of modernist writing’s practices over the next decade or so would ultimately start to change that.

Chapter 3, “Erskine Caldwell, Smut, and the Paperbacking of Obscenity,” examines how the fiction of Erskine Caldwell undermines Lewis’s basic assumptions. For Caldwell, obscenity was no longer something writers could take for granted by the 1930s, because books were quite possibly henceforth unable to elicit a bodily response at all. Instead, Caldwell’s novels in this decade addressed their doubtful
capacity for salaciousness through the calculated, repeated experience of mirthful frustration. Evaluating such an experience in light of Judge Bok’s ruling in Commonwealth v. Gordon et al. (1949), which absolved God’s Little Acre of obscenity in the state of Pennsylvania, I approach both the novel and legal case as indicative of contemporary shifts in the cultural hierarchies existing between visual media and print texts. According to Bok, God’s Little Acre was not obscene because it failed to present its readers with the erotic allurement of a publicly lewd man, the clear and present danger of which he assumed as given. I then go on to consider more closely the roles played by frustration in Caldwell’s fiction, particularly in his representations of visuality, by comparing the indeterminacies and gaps in Caldwellian voyeurism to the sorts of frustrating experiences elicited by the illustrated covers of the paperback reprints of his books in the late 1940s. In the concluding section of this chapter, I discuss both of these frustrations—verbal and visual—in connection with the concept of “smut” elaborated by Sigmund Freud in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905). For Freud, when smutty language does not lead to sexual acts, it can become an autonomous pleasure, albeit one thereafter primed to transmute into action with a change in circumstances. Smut, I contend, is a way of conceiving the linkages between erotic allurements, bodily experiences, and the various frustrations intervening between the two in Caldwell’s fiction and in writing more generally. Caldwell in turn opens up the possibility that the failure of words to seduce readers may nevertheless constitute a technique of “weak” seduction or salacity beyond the purview of proscriptive judges.

Chapter 4, “Sin, Sex, and Segregation in Lillian Smith’s Silent South,” returns to the assumptions subtending Lewis’s position by showing that for Smith obscenity was indeed an overpowering result of a cultural training that hailed a specific kind of social identity. In particular, I contend that the essays, fiction, and little magazine publications of this civil rights activist in the 1930s and 1940s consistently presented the Jim Crow South as a region organized by obscene words that enacted racial difference through the dangers said to be presented by particular forms of sexual desire. Just as certain body parts were off-limits to Southern youth, so too were certain groups of people, and Smith’s work from this period comprises an attempt to account for the ways in which sin, sex, and segregation mutually reproduced and overdetermined the efficacy of the social, cultural, and political institutions of the region. In fact, in Commonwealth v. Isenstadt (1945) the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court criticized—and in part proscribed—Strange Fruit because of its artful capacity to make such linkages not only known but also overwhelmingly felt by its readers. According to the opinions in Isenstadt, whether panderingly attractive or unduly repellent, words in that novel did in fact move beyond the limits of what language ought to do to people. Far from being the biased observations of a group of robed censors, however, these opposing perspectives on the efficacy of Smith’s
language—its ability to push and pull its readers—were shrewdly attentive to the somatic functions her texts almost ceaselessly ascribe to words. In *Strange Fruit*, in particular, Smith sought to demonstrate how segregation had turned the early twentieth-century South into the nation’s closet, whereby symptomatic inconsistencies and incoherence in a community’s sexual knowledge could act as guarantor for discriminating laws, behaviors, and folkways that trumped any rational appeals a reformer might hope to make to her community.

The work of Lewis, Caldwell, and Smith accordingly typify the response of fiction to the evolving standards for obscenity in this period. From within the unfolding process that eventually delivered writing to its present-day neutral zone, Lewis’s essays and creative writing still assume that mere words on the page can hyperbolically affect readers in the world, though his account of obscene embodiment as something that can be performatively contradicted suggests that bodily sensations can be made to mean something other than what they in fact are: just because a woman in a Thomas Hardy novel gives a character in “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” an erection does not mean that Lewis would have us understand this character to be aroused by her. What Lewis instead insists upon time and time again is that the body and its reactions to stimuli can be transformed into rhetorical gestures, into ironic expressions emanating from a dubious self barely subsisting just below the surface. The work of Smith provides a surprisingly complementary instance of an author from this period who also subsumes bodily arousal under a broader web of signification, although her focus is on allegory rather than irony. For Smith, obscenity does not so much offend as discriminate against, especially by corporeally marking and enforcing otherwise unstable black-white divides. Ultimately, she responds to this dilemma by subjecting obscene words (and their inexorable efficacy in hailing racialized bodies) to an allegorical philosophy of history in which the problems posed by obscenity become null in the face of the evaporation of racial divisions in a projected future where being a human means acting collectively and cooperatively for the good of all. Between Lewis’s ironic embodiment of obscenity and Smith’s allegorical disembodiment of it, Caldwell’s fiction opens up a parenthesis in which an aroused bodily response to writing need not (indeed, probably will not) occur. Caldwell’s writing alludes time and time again to voyeuristic scenes of salacity but refuses to evoke them visually, leaving his reader-viewers to wait and not see as they stare expectantly through a peephole looking out onto a void space that will not be filled, though it is said to remain engrossing all the same. Unlike the works of Lewis or Smith, Caldwell’s fiction problematizes the medium of obscenity rather than the fact of obscene embodiment itself. In sum, then, whereas Lewis has the bodily response evoked by book obscenity take the form of a performative contradiction, and whereas Smith, following the proscription of *Strange Fruit*, spends the remainder of her career trying to allegorically efface the obscene human body
out of existence altogether, Caldwell cussedly doubts that such obscene efficacy is even possible in the case of books anymore.

Finally, when we consider the history of legal obscenity and writing in the first half of the twentieth century, the story that fitfully emerges is not simply the naturalist one of failure but also the *Body Snatchers* tale of usurpations, howsoever improbable they may appear at first glance. We therefore come upon a contrarian Wyndham Lewis who displaces the renowned James Joyce at the center of *The Little Review*’s legendarily outsized ordeals with obscenity; a know-nothing Erskine Caldwell, whose Southern legion of minimalist hick voyeurs cudfully dislodges D. H. Lawrence’s secular apostles of the flesh; and a decently indecent Lillian Smith, whose early determinist visions of the Jim Crow South and later evolutionary cosmologies supplant the more expressly tragic subjectivities explored in the proscribed writings of William Faulkner. In short, this book is all about modernism’s tardy cuckoos, the presumptive might-have-beens who never quite managed to make it and thus ended up being left behind in the discard pile among the never-weres, the preterite of “obscene modernism.” *Literary Obscenities* is for the scumbags, smut peddlers, and closet cases who populated the literary landscape towered over by the modernist giants we love to study, criticize, and esteem. More often than not, however, this thing called “obscenity” was produced by men and women as unprepossessing and downright disreputable as these bottom dogs.