Literary Obscenities

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So now she knew I knew she knew I knew, and I wondered how we would play out the Proust bit.


Over the last twenty-five years, the life’s work of the writer and civil rights activist Lillian Smith has proven to be a generative object of study for scholars of twentieth-century Southern literature and culture, particularly as these fields relate to ideology, liberalism, racial conversion narratives, temporality, the grotesque, and same-sex desire.¹ For the most part, this critical interest has tended to focus on Smith’s two major works of the 1940s, her first novel, Strange Fruit, and her first memoir, Killers of the Dream (1949). Even in those cases where her later texts—composed in a variety of genres, ranging from occasional essays, fiction, and lyrical memoirs to documentary writing and new journalism—come into consideration, these works have often been treated in isolation from, or in pointed contrast to, her earlier writings. Part of my aim here is to use Strange Fruit’s legal troubles with obscenity in the 1940s as an occasion for suggesting how Smith’s writerly output might be reconceived as a unified whole that is variously stimulated, provoked, disgusted, and haunted by the unmanageable appeals that words can conceivably make on bodies—appeals that seemingly thwarted the efforts of reformers such as herself to persuade others that their modes of organizing life and their very lives themselves must change. Segregation is thus obscene in Smith’s work insofar as
rituals, customs, and habits are able to be followed, adopted, and embodied by means of the obscene speech acts that characterize so much segregationist discourse. It is precisely in this way that obscenity becomes understood in Smith's writing early on as a way of representing and living race bodily. As they developed between the 1930s and 1960s, Smith's responses to the power of certain "obscene" words to do rather than to merely mean came not only to influence her later shift in attention from region to cosmos (and from racialist race to the human race) but also to highlight her specific contributions as a significant transitional figure in the history of twentieth-century Southern liberalism.

Yet this relationship between obscenity and segregation never goes away in Smith's writing, even as her thinking underwent a momentous recasting in the 1950s and 1960s, when she attempted to overcome its challenges by using the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to develop an optimistic philosophy of man's evolutionary history that would prove capable of neutralizing the obscene words (and thus bodily appeals) of segregation. Whereas the power of words to leave Southerners more done to than doing confronted Smith in the 1940s either with an overdetermined loss of agency or with idle speculation regarding alternate regional histories, her later reception of Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955) caused her instead to broaden her conception of history to units of measurement larger than region, country, or race. I thus end the chapter first by briefly situating Smith's preoccupation with alternate histories in terms of developments in midcentury liberalism and then by detailing how her attempt to overcome the obscenity of segregation in a new philosophy of history nevertheless reproduced some of the signal harms she had initially sought to circumvent. If the conclusion I draw from this does not let Smith off the hook, then that is not so much a criticism of her as it is an acknowledgment of just how deeply the harm of obscene words informed her way of seeing not just the South but eventually all that was, is, and shall be, and it is likewise a harm that received a complementary formulation from perhaps the most attentive, if unlikely, critics of her entire career as a writer: the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

I

During the first month of its release in 1944, a copy of *Strange Fruit* was purchased by a Boston-area resident as a birthday present for a daughter who was away at college. Before sending his gift, however, he decided to read the novel and was outraged to discover repeated instances of the word "fuckin."

The father notified the authorities of what he viewed to be the book's indecency, and after reviewing the text themselves, the police notified local booksellers that *Strange Fruit* was in fact obscene and could no longer be offered for sale in Boston, an order that
most bookshop owners obeyed in the following months. Upset by the suppression of Smith’s novel, popular historian and local resident Bernard DeVoto managed to convince a Cambridge bookshop owner, Abraham Isenstadt, to put the police chief’s decision to the test by selling him a copy of the novel, even though this meant that Isenstadt would likely face arrest and criminal prosecution, which he indeed subsequently did. At trial Smith’s publishers, Reynal & Hitchcock, helped provide counsel for Isenstadt’s defense, and during the pretrial proceedings Smith herself was asked if she would be willing to obviate the need for prosecution by deleting parts of the novel, including objectionable words and in some instances entire passages and scenes. She refused, and the trial went forward in the Middlesex Superior Court, where Isenstadt received a judge’s verdict of guilty for selling and having in his possession for the purpose of sale Smith’s *Strange Fruit*.

In 1945 Isenstadt appealed his conviction to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. At the time of both his trial and his appeal, the statute under which he was prosecuted (Massachusetts General Laws, Ter. Ed., chapter 272, §28, as amended in 1934 and 1943) read as follows:

> Whoever imports, prints, publishes, sells or distributes a book, pamphlet, ballad, printed paper, phonographic record or other thing which is obscene, indecent or impure, or manifestly tends to corrupt the morals of youth, or an obscene, indecent or impure print, picture, figure, image or description, manifestly tending to corrupt the morals of youth, or introduces into a family, school or place of education, or buys, procures, receives or has in his possession any such book, pamphlet, ballad, printed paper, phonographic record, obscene, indecent or impure print, figure, image or other thing, either for the purpose of sale, exhibition, loan or circulation or with the intent to introduce the same into a family, school or place of education, shall . . . be punished.

Isenstadt’s lawyers sought to undermine obscenity understood either as a legal definition or as an operational norm by taking an anatomist’s knife to the statute in question. Both in the Middlesex Superior Court and on appeal in the Supreme Judicial Court, their defense consisted of a nineteen-point attack on Massachusetts obscenity law, arguing that *Strange Fruit* was not obscene (point three), nor indecent (point four), nor impure (point five); that the statute was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment because it was too imprecisely worded (point eleven); and that the only relevant test for a book’s obscenity required the court to take into account both the whole work’s dominant effect *and* the opinion of literary experts as to the relationship of the work’s objectionable parts to this holistically defined dominant effect (point nineteen). The Middlesex Superior Court judge ended up rejecting all of the defense’s claims except the thirteenth (that the book should be
judged as a whole) and seventeenth (that the court should take into account contemporary community standards in interpreting what is obscene, indecent, impure, or manifestly corruptive of the morals of the young) points, with which the judge agreed at trial, though he nevertheless found *Strange Fruit* to be guilty of obscenity.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld Isenstadt's conviction on appeal because, when judged as a whole, *Strange Fruit* could be said in the court's "best judgment as trier of facts" to possess "the qualities of obscenity, indecency, or impurity" as described in the Commonwealth's statute. The *Isenstadt* opinion begins by confronting Massachusetts's notoriety as the nation's region for unduly repressive censorship standards, especially those applied to books. Citing recent law review articles highly critical of obscenity prosecutions in the Commonwealth, the court reminds its detractors and critics that as a part of the judicial branch it is not in the business of making public policy:

> With this background in mind it may not be out of place to recall that it is not our function to assume a “liberal” attitude or a “conservative” attitude. As in other cases of statutory construction and application, it is our plain but not necessarily easy duty to read the words of the statute in the sense in which they were intended, to accept and enforce the public policy of the Commonwealth as disclosed by its policymaking body, whatever our own personal opinions may be, and to avoid judicial legislation in the guise of new constructions to meet real or supposed new popular viewpoints, preserving always to the Legislature alone its proper prerogative of adjusting the statutes to changed conditions.

Whatever legitimation problems obscenity law may have been undergoing in other state and appellate courts throughout the United States in the past decade, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court argues that the Commonwealth's courtrooms were not the proper venue for taking sides in the matter. The polemical thrust of the court's opinion is thus made clear: other courts ought to be following, rather than disavowing, Massachusetts's example in literary censorship by sedulously administering obscenity law instead of drastically revising it.

As if to ratify its disinterested stance, the court in *Isenstadt* moves on to assert that the governmental separation of powers continues to function smoothly in the Commonwealth. Unlike the state of New York, for instance, Massachusetts had been able to amend its obscenity statute through the state legislature so that works charged with obscenity now had to be judged as a whole. Therefore, if Woolsey's test was in force throughout the Commonwealth by the mid-1940s, then that was because its lawmakers—rather than its renegade judges—had made it so. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court can thus agree with the defense's claims that *Strange Fruit* should be evaluated as a whole in any obscenity proceedings. In
a sharp rejoinder to those too quick to interpret Woolsey’s test as necessitating the end of book obscenity once and for all, however, the court’s opinion insists that a novel can still pose obscene threats even when judged as a whole, provided it “contains prohibited matter in such quantity or of such nature as to flavor the whole and impart to the whole any of the qualities mentioned in the statute.”

A matter of both quantity and quality, holistic obscenity requires that judges and juries have sense enough to follow Woolsey’s lead in classifying with some precision the bodily reactions called forth by the matter charged with obscenity. As Woolsey himself admits in the *Ulysses* opinion, “I am quite aware that owing to some of its scenes ‘Ulysses’ is a rather strong draught to ask some sensitive, though normal, persons to take. But my considered opinion, after long reflection, is that, whilst in many places the effect of ‘Ulysses’ on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac.” Consequently, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court reads Woolsey along the grain in claiming that “a book might be found to come within the prohibition of the statute although only a comparatively few passages contained matter objectionable according to the principles herein explained if that matter were such as to offer a strong salacious appeal and to cause the book to be bought and read on account of it.” A text may very well make historical, social, literary, emetic, or otherwise innocent appeals to its presumed readership in addition to salacious ones, but that does not also mean that these latter proscribable appeals would be any less capable of predominating nonetheless. In the court’s faithful construction of Woolsey, then, a work that is obscene on the whole need not be a wholly obscene work.

Of course, to speak of a text’s salacious appeals raises a number of questions, not least those pertaining to address: to whom exactly are such appeals being made? The court in *Isenstadt* grants that obscenity’s appeals do not subsist in a vacuum but rather are a matter of determinate effects on probable consumers, meaning they do not involve “any classification of [a book’s] subject matter or of its words as being in themselves innocent or obscene” (*Isenstadt*, 318 Mass., at 549). There is no such thing as obscenity in itself; there is only obscenity for others, the proscribable effects of which include the incitement of “lascivious thoughts,” the arousal of “lustful desire,” and “the corruption of morals” among the community’s youth. First of all, this quasi-pragmatist insistence on approaching obscenity in terms of its effects on the world should be understood as the court’s attempt to demote the dispositive force of aesthetic criteria in making determinations as to a work’s obscenity. No mere idiosyncrasy of the *Isenstadt* court, the aversion to taking taste into account here should be viewed in the context of the broader crises of legitimacy that legal obscenity was experiencing in the United States at the time. If the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court were to admit that it was relevant to evaluate “refinement, propriety and good taste” in reaching its judgments here, then obscenity—already
elusive enough in the court’s present construction—would risk evaporating into 
the shapeless flux of ever more rapidly changing social conventions, taboos, and 
fashions: “A penal statute requiring conformity to some current standard of pro-
priety defined only by the statutory words quoted above would make the standard 
an uncertain one, shifting with every new judge or jury.”

By making effects rather than aesthetic taste the test for obscenity, the Isenstadt 
opinion seeks instead to offer some conceptual stability to the increasingly indistinct 
terrain of legal obscenity: “The statute does not forbid realistically coarse scenes 
or vulgar words merely because they are coarse or vulgar, although such scenes 
or words may be considered so far as they bear upon the test already stated of the 
effect of the book upon its readers” (Isenstadt, at 550). However, this nonaesthetic 
standard for obscenity remains consistent with a version of aesthetic autonomy, 
insofar as the court promises to leave purely aesthetic works outside the purview 
of Massachusetts’s obscenity statute. Though the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial 
Court sees the danger in using aesthetic criteria to take the measure of obscenity, 
it cannot help suggesting at the same time that works whose qualities are simply 
aesthetic pose no obscene danger at all. A realist novel can be as vulgar or as coarse 
as it dares to be, so long as it does not coarsen or vulgarize those who come across 
it in the world to the point of moral corruption. Likewise, between realism and the 
real world there exists a gap that cannot be bridged through the bodies of readers 
because genuine realism, by virtue of its clearly fictional nature, avoids embodying 
its potential coarseness, vulgarity, or corruption despite its verisimilitude.

If the effect of a work on all or part of a community is the test for obscenity in 
1940s Massachusetts, then texts charged with obscenity must “be judged in light 
of the customs and habits of thought of the time and place of the alleged offense” 
(Isenstadt, at 551). Notwithstanding the court’s implicit antipathy toward the use of 
aesthetic standards in assessing what is so obscene about obscenity, it is not at all 
clear how judging obscenity’s effects in terms of contemporary habits and customs 
avoids relativism any better than does the judging of obscene texts in terms of 
taste, convention, or taboo. In other words, the reformulation of the Massachusetts 
Supreme Judicial Court’s aesthetic prejudices into quasi-sociological terms does not 
get rid of the problems posed by taste, remainders of which stubbornly persist in 
the Isenstadt opinion. For one thing, the echolaliac whirl of synonyms heard in the 
Massachusetts obscenity statute (obscene works are indecent, which means they 
are impure, which means they are obscene, which means they are indecent, which 
means they are impure, . . . ) reproduces itself in the very distinction upon which 
the Isenstadt court hopes to find solid ground. After all, because the objected-to 
tabooos, conventions, and tastes themselves all comprise so many customs and habits 
of thought, and vice versa, they suggest that obscenity in the Commonwealth is no 
less subject to the uncertainties plaguing courts and legislatures throughout the
United States at the time. Juries, “representing a cross section of the people, both old and young,” may very well “commonly be a suitable arbiter” in obscenity trials (Isernstadt, at 558–60). Yet in the end it is not altogether clear how the manner in which juries arbitrate is necessarily different from the aesthetic procedures so forcefully objected to throughout the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s opinion.

This confusion of community standards with community taste expresses itself again in the court’s account of how juries should go about determining whether the charged work is “appreciably injurious to society” in the ways outlined by the Commonwealth’s statute. “A book,” the Isernstadt court writes, “that adversely affects a substantial proportion of its readers may well be found to lower appreciably the average moral tone of the mass in the respects hereinbefore described and to fall within the intended prohibition” (Isernstadt, at 552). That is to say, juries are to evaluate both obscene materials and their communities holistically: “the statute was designed for the protection of the public as a whole” (Isernstadt, at 551). Just as a text need not make salacious appeals on every or even in a majority of its pages to be judged obscene, the text does not have to be injurious to the entirety or even to a certain percentage of the local population before a jury can proscribe it as obscene. Instead, if the salacious appeals of the charged material predominate among a portion of the community to such a degree that those effects are of such a nature “as to flavor the whole [community] and impart to the whole [community] any of the qualities mentioned in the statute,” then a determination of obscenity could be legitimately made (Isernstadt, at 549). The Commonwealth’s juries at that time were thus instructed to read their local communities as they would an obscene book.

While it would be easy for one to interpret these slippages between art and obscenity as inadvertent and thereby undermine the reasoning used throughout Isernstadt, I take this somewhat fuzzily maintained distinction to offer us instead a more forthright account of the relationship between obscenity and art than any to be found in those obscenity cases of the period that acted to deproscribe book obscenity. After all, one of the key arguments used by liberalizing jurists in neutralizing contemporary perceptions of the threats posed by book obscenity was the contention that aesthetic quality necessarily trumped obscenity’s unruly appeals. Typical of such an approach is the opinion of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in United States v. Levine (1936), in which Circuit Court Judge Learned Hand (Augustus Hand’s first cousin) observes that the standard for obscenity “must be the likelihood that the work will arouse the salacity of the reader to whom it is sent as to outweigh any literary, scientific or other merits it may have in that reader’s hands.” Therefore, the underlying assumption in Levine is that a literary text maintains its identity as a literary text until its obscenity becomes too much, at which point it ceases to be literary and reveals itself instead to be simply an obscene text.
On its face, this argument is a good deal more facile than the *Isenstadt* court’s convoluted formulation of the problem, in which aesthetic approaches to obscenity are demoted, though aesthetics as such does not disappear altogether. In other words, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court refuses to settle for conceptualizing obscenity as a matter of either/or: “Sincerity and literary art are not the antitheses of obscenity, indecency, and impurity in such manner that one set of qualities can be set off against the other and judgment rendered according to an imaginary balance supposed to be left over on one side or the other. The same book may be characterized by all of these qualities. Indeed, obscenity may sometimes be made even more alluring and suggestive by the zeal which comes from sincerity and by the added force of artistic presentation” (*Isenstadt*, at 553). Unlike the obscenity case law that followed the deproscribing course marked out by Woolsey in *United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses”*, the *Isenstadt* opinion refuses to see the obscene and the literary as mutually exclusive. In part, this refusal is grounded in the court’s already described commitment to the governmental separation of powers: “If it is thought that modern conditions require that [an aesthetic] exception be made, the Legislature and not this court should make it” (*Isenstadt*, at 553–54). More importantly, however, in declining to separate the aesthetic from the obscene once and for all, the *Isenstadt* court offers a nuanced account of what both categories are mutually capable of doing in the world. If the opinion’s initial division of aesthetics from obscenity seemed to suggest that this autonomization of aesthetics implausibly requires that art be without effect (as in the hypothetical example of the genuinely realist novel), then in further developing its account of the art/obscenity split the *Isenstadt* opinion confronts the very real potential for there to be obscene artworks or literary obscenity or even a really salacious piece of realism.

With this fairly subtle account of the relationship between obscenity and art in place, the court’s opinion summarizes (rather quickly) the plot of *Strange Fruit* and itemizes (at much greater length) the potentially obscene, indecent, or impure episodes and moments in Smith’s novel. Such moments and episodes are said to include “four scenes of sexual intercourse, including one supposed to have been imagined,” all of variable suggestiveness and lengths, “from a few lines to several pages”; a fifth scene involving “amatory attitudes, kissing, a loosened blouse, exposed breasts, and circumstances suggesting but perhaps not necessarily requiring an act of intercourse”; a sixth scene describing Tracy Deen’s drunken and failed attempt to rape Nonnie Anderson, from which scene *Isenstadt* quotes extensively; and fifty instances containing a variety of suspect material, including, “indecent assaults upon little girls,” accounts of masturbation involving boys, acts of excretion, bouncing breasts and rumps, and a boy exposing his genitalia to a group of laughing girls (*Isenstadt*, at 555). Though it argued earlier in the opinion that obscenity is more than a matter of counting pages, the *Isenstadt* court nevertheless made a
special point of dividing its 250-page copy of *Strange Fruit* by these fifty passages in order to agree with the Middlesex Superior Court’s decision that the novel as a whole could be adjudged obscene (*Isenstadt*, at 549 and 555). Not the tragic emplotment briefly described by the court but rather the exhaustively itemized salacious scenes that punctually occur every five pages are said to comprise the connective tissue forming the novel into a whole.

The court goes on to take Smith’s novel to task for “offer[ing] no remedy” for the problems it addresses (*Isenstadt*, at 556). Also, despite agreeing with Isenstadt’s lawyers that illicit love outside of marriage is in itself a “permissible theme” for a novel, the opinion nevertheless faults *Strange Fruit* for its overreliance on obscene effects:

Regarding the book as a whole, it is our opinion that a jury of honest and reasonable men could find beyond a reasonable doubt that it contains much that, even in this post-Victorian era, would tend to promote lascivious thoughts and to arouse lustful desire in the minds of substantial numbers of that public into whose hands this book, obviously intended for general sale, is likely to fall; that the matter which could be found objectionable is not necessary to convey any sincere message the book may contain and is of such character and so pervades the work as to give to the whole a sensual and licentious quality calculated to produce the harm which the statute was intended to prevent; and that that quality could be found to persist notwithstanding any literary or artistic merit (*Isenstadt*, at 556–57).

If the *Isenstadt* opinion goes out of its way to offer a more labile account of obscenity and art than that to be found in liberalizing obscenity cases of the period, then it does so in part to ensure that *Strange Fruit*’s artistry does not exempt it from obscenity law; rather, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court finds Smith’s novel to be an instance of the sort of literary obscenity that is not just possible but also proscribable in the Commonwealth. Simply put, *Strange Fruit*’s artistry intensifies its obscene passagework.\(^{11}\)

In his dissenting opinion, Judge Lummus grants that the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court construes the statute correctly but has drawn the wrong conclusions from it. To be sure, *Strange Fruit* is “blemished by coarse words and scenes, some of which appear irrelevant to the plot,” but ultimately this extraneous “coarseness is repellent,” not attractive.\(^{12}\) Alongside its disgusting qualities, Lummus sees the novel’s tragic elements as *dampening* the force of such claims: “It is a grim tragedy, not relieved even by humor. Virtue is not derided, neither is vice made attractive. In the book, the wages of sin is literally death. The reader is left depressed, unable to solve a tragic problem.”\(^{13}\) Since *Strange Fruit* neither promotes
lascivious thoughts nor arouses lustful desires, Lummus contends that if the novel now threatened to corrupt the morals of the Commonwealth’s youth, then that was because it was being talked about in Massachusetts’s courtrooms: “Such knowledge as I have leads me to believe that without such artificial stimulation novels of the class into which the book in question falls are read by few girls and by practically no boys.” Moreover, should a few of these hypothetical girls and boys actually get their hands on Strange Fruit, “they would find it dull reading. . . And if by chance some should wade through it, I think it could not reasonably be found to have any erotic allurement, even for youth.” The unquestionably artful accomplishments of Smith’s novel raises doubts in Lummus’s dissenting opinion as to the potential for obscenity to be conveyed by means of those very same accomplishments. In fact, not even Strange Fruit’s foulmouthed words and scenes can enliven the deepening depression into which its overdetermined artistry puts its readers. Smith’s novel repulses rather than salaciously attracts.

II
In a series of thirty chapters that alternate narrative focalization mostly through members of one white family (the Deens) and the college-educated siblings of one African American family (the Andersons) living in the small fictional Georgia town of Maxwell, Strange Fruit does seem on its face to tell a story in which “the wages of sin is literally death.” Most conspicuously, two murders appear to be the direct consequences of Tracy Deen’s illicit relationship with Nonnie Anderson. Tracy himself is gunned down by Nonnie’s brother, Ed, who manages to escape Maxwell before the body is discovered by Henry, one of the African American servants in the Deen household and Tracy’s best friend. Blame for Tracy’s death falls on Henry, and even though members of the “decent” white community attempt to protect him by hiding him in the town jail, the poor white rabblement quickly descends upon Maxwell and eventually discovers him. The lynching of Henry comprises the novel’s climax, and its varying effects on the town are described at length in the penultimate chapter as the narration starts to become serially focalized through different members of the community in a number of brief sketches that canvass the range of Maxwell’s reactions to the spectacular brutalization of African American men. Along the way to this climax, Southern revival meetings come in for lengthy representations (the eighteenth chapter is narrated through the group consciousness constituted by the crowd gathered at one such meeting) and sustained criticism; the lack of an independent and openly critical Southern press gets punctually lamented; and by the end the black underclass, particularly its women, continue to serve the town’s “decent” whites as they have always done: “‘Time for working women to get up,’ [Nonnie’s sister, Bess] called briskly, and followed her words with a rough shake of
Nonnie’s shoulder, a push of her foot in [the] side [of Henry’s lover, Dessie]” (SF, 313). The lynching of Henry is not a rupture in time for these women but rather its cyclical renewal, because it is just a typical, albeit eventful, part of Maxwell’s calendar to which Smith’s novel apparently “offers no remedy,” as the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court insisted.

More significantly, however, it would seem that Strange Fruit undermines the basis for such a remedy because words themselves overwhelm the prospect of ameliorative social change altogether. As the two rival views in Isenstadt contend, words in the novel do in fact have striking effects on people. For one thing, words in Strange Fruit are aprons with which to soothe troubled children. For instance, Tillie Anderson (the deceased mother of Bess, Ed, and Nonnie) is said to have once “use[d] words to take that look [of fear] off [her children’s] faces as she would have used her apron to wipe their noses” (SF, 19). Words also manage to get so emptied of their meanings that their remained husks start to jangle hilariously: “That was the pattern. Prentiss Reid [Maxwell’s ‘liberal’ newspaperman] said the tabooed, the terrible. Everybody laughed, making things all right, taking the meanings from words, leaving only their shells to rattle around in your memory” (SF, 40).

Some words are also flammable when uttered aloud: “When Tracy 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” (SF, 49).

Alternatively, certain words devastate:

_Negro._ [Nonnie]’d said it. Now everything would be spoiled. Ruined as it always was [for Tracy]! (SF, 81)

_Colored girl._ Negro. Spoiling every good moment, like a hair that’s got onto your food. Why under God’s heaven did [Tracy] keep on thinking those damned words! Why couldn’t he—Jesus! (SF, 121)

In addition to their fitfully ruinous, hirsute, and bioluminescent properties, words also appear to be magnetized: “Tracy and Henry, playing in the dark outside, drew near the words like bits of steel to a magnet” (SF, 96). They are also damnably cumbersome for Henry’s father: “Words so heavy they seemed to fall back on his own chest as he said them” (SF, 96). Furthermore, words tend to cling to you irrevocably, as Ed Anderson well knows: “Those words and the white children’s chocolate drop hurled at you on your way to school, which was their back way to school and the way they used most, you’d never forget. You’d pick up cow dung and throw it and yan yan yan back at them. It didn’t help much. They could wash off cow dung, forget a yell that had no meaning. You could never forget chocolate drop long as you lived. It was smeared on you to the bone” (SF, 144). Yet even Ed can get nostalgic
for the days when older poor whites in the county would hurl words as if they were projectiles at African American laborers: “[Cap’n Rushton] looked petered out, slumped down in his chair. Not as he used to be, riding his white mare across fields, jacking up the choppers, throwing words around like a hailstorm, though most took them with a laugh, liking the boss” (SF, 146). When they are not being used to break shackles (“And for a second the words [of Preacher Dunwoodie] had snapped a chain in two” [SF, 160]), words themselves comprise so many rhythmic fetters (“The words attached themselves to a revival tune now and began coiling, uncoiling, coiling in [Nonnie’s] mind” [SF, 193]) that may eventually start to detonate (“Words that, unspoken, seem so harmless would, once said aloud, become dangerous explosives containing hidden feelings that would flame into something [that Tracy’s sister, Laura Deen,] dared not set free” [SF, 206]). Even on the novel’s penultimate page, words still obstinately confront Nonnie, Bess, Dessie, and presumably Smith’s readers as well with all the inexplicable violence of a natural disaster: “No, Nonnie wanted her [and Tracy’s] baby, she had said, and with those few words great obstacles had been thrown across their future as casually as an earthquake or storm does its work” (SF, 313).

As this brief but by no means exhaustive survey suggests, words in Strange Fruit do not have meanings so much as they evoke erratic physical responses, ranging from arousal, attraction, and solace to sensations of involuntary confinement, disgust, and even destruction. In other words, Smith’s novel approaches language itself in much the same spirit as does the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Words have significance for both only so long as they betray discernible effects in the world. A key difference, however, is that whereas Isenstadt is interested in the purely libidinal potentials the book’s language has for likely readers, Smith’s account of the good and the bad that words do seems more preoccupied with the identity-constituting functions they can perform as well, particularly along racialist lines. After all, besides Nonnie Anderson herself, what most noticeably links Tracy Deen to Ed Anderson (Tracy’s murderer) are the derogatory effects that the language of blackness (“negro,” “colored girl,” “chocolate drop”) is said to have had on both of them, despite their respective efforts to deny these words their unduly affecting force.

One notable strategy for attempting to carry through this denial in the novel is to emphasize the separability of signifier (“colored girl”) from referent (Nonnie herself). For instance, as the second sentence of Strange Fruit highlights, and as the rest of the text averts to over and over again, Nonnie is so light-skinned that she could pass for white: “Tall and slim and white in the dusk, the girl stood there, hands on the picket gate” (SF, 1). Given Nonnie’s racially ambiguous appearance, Tracy is thus able to sustain the recurring fantasy that his relationship with her, which spans many years, is like any other same-race relationship in Maxwell, save
for those moments in which other people mention or Nonnie herself alludes to her blackness in words, at which point their entire history together becomes “spoiled” for him. In short, Tracy’s perception of the racial difference said to separate him from Nonnie increasingly becomes a function of the very language used to mark and maintain that difference, even as Tracy lamely tries to screen himself off from the effects that words like “colored girl” or “negro” manifestly have on him, if not on Nonnie herself: “But it wasn’t ruined. Out there on the lime cliff, brown water swirling below you, sky paled out by the moon above you, great oaks with sagging moss draping your nakedness, hiding you from the world, you could think that word [“negro”] without getting sick at your stomach. You could say it, say Nonnie’s name after it, and still believe in her and yourself. The world’s wrong, you could say. Dead wrong” (SF, 81). Haltingly, Nonnie goes on to echo this reverie, albeit in terms that manage to be more self-aware than, though just as quixotic as, those of Tracy: “She’d turn then, as if she had read his thoughts. ‘Race is something—made up, to me. Not real. I don’t—have to believe in it. Social position—ambition—seem made up too. Games for folks to—forget their troubles with. Bess says I’m crazy, that I live in a dream world’” (SF, 81).

As this passage implies, Nonnie tends to read race like a good poststructuralist. After all, like class, is said to be a discursive construct (“‘something—made up’”) that people use and are used by in order to get themselves distracted from the things that embroil their daily lives (“games for folks to—forget their troubles with”). Far from stabilizing the meanings of racial constructs, however, language makes not only a game of the Manichaean melodramas of racialist ideologies but also a game that Nonnie can refuse to play because she does not “‘have to believe in it.’” That is to say, far from necessarily comprising the ever-present spoiler that they are for Tracy, “negro” and “colored girl” are simply words whose meanings and effects fail to fully actualize themselves because they never reliably refer to either objects or experiences in the real world; at the end of the day, race is “‘not real.’” If they are really just another set of fictions within social experience, then “colored girl” and “negro” need not therefore stick to Nonnie as they obstinately do to her “chocolate drop”–smeared brother.

Though incapable of systematizing his views quite this cogently, the college dropout Tracy is still capable of sharing in Nonnie’s refusal of race in epiphanic moments that prove to be as fleeting as they are routinized: “God! You could hear that damned word and not mind it. You didn’t give a goddam what the world thought. She was yours, that’s all! She’s my girl. She’s lovely and beautiful, and she’s mine. He’d laughed, and pulled her to him again. Holding her there, he knew he loved her—as a man loves the woman for all his needs” (SF, 81). Tracy and Nonnie may be intermittently able to negate the significance that “negro” and “colored girl” have in the world, but they have nothing in their own world to affirm beyond a
relationship that is itself an effect of the power those words really do have and about which Tracy manifestly has more doubts than does Nonnie. “Colored girl” and “negro” may be unreal for Nonnie, but for Tracy they have a substance from which he cannot escape, despite his endless failed attempts to disavow or ignore them in his mind. Therefore, although Smith’s novel almost marvels at them, Nonnie’s postracial and proto-poststructuralist habits of thought are by no means efficacious or exemplary. No matter how susceptible blackness and the discourses sustaining it may prove to be to doubts and skepticism, in the theoretically obtuse everyday world they still retain their ability to hail, hierarchize, and—in at least two instances here—kill.

An important site for these functions as well as the efforts made to resist them is Nonnie’s brother Ed, who from the very beginning appears before us as simultaneously blackened, quantified, and effaced: “[Ed] was a black digit marked out by white chalk. He wasn’t there on the sidewalk. He never had been there . . . he just wasn’t anywhere—where those eyes looked—where those damned eyes—” (SF, 7). As a quasi-Ellisonian invisible man, Ed’s psychological ordeals in the novel understandably consist of so many struggles for recognition in his visit home to Maxwell, where his thoughts return continuously to how it is he came to be made this “black digit marked out by white chalk.” His memories reveal that the carefully observed silences surrounding race have been just as effective in making him a dark spectral digit as its words have been. During a trip with Sam Perry, a friend from childhood who is now a doctor for the county’s black population, Ed has an involuntary memory of when he was a teenager and boasted to Sam and a friend of theirs that he had already had sexual experiences with white women. Ed was forcibly silenced by them at that time: “‘Boy,’ Sam laid his hand on Ed’s shoulder in his slow way, ‘leave white girls out of your mouth. And your mind.’ He added, ‘Might as well pick up a rattler, Ed’” (SF, 149). The need for a black man to keep quiet about white women here is a product of the same sorts of forces that had traumatically smeared Ed with the words “chocolate drop” even earlier in his youth. Silence thus acts on people much as words do in Strange Fruit insofar as Ed’s subjection to the distorting pressures exerted upon what he does and does not say follows from the feigned knowledgeableness with which he sought, and presumably still seeks, to cover up “the feel of his ignorance” (149). In short, pretending to “know white girls” is sure to get Ed deprived of the freedom to express or give name to his real sexual desires (149), whatever they may actually be.17

What this suggests is that, according to Strange Fruit, segregation has turned the mid-twentieth-century South into the nation’s closet. It is a region in which knowledge refers us ultimately to sexual knowledge, and what this sexual knowledge might mean exists in all sorts of fraught relationships—collusive, oppositional, competitive, or instrumental—to ignorance.18 Smith’s text is thus invested in
determining how and why race manages to get embodied in and confused with the silences, words, and assumptions connected to the forms that sexual desire happens to take. Accordingly, *Strange Fruit* demonstrates how significant irregularities in a community’s knowledge aid in the continuing enforcement of segregation in the Jim Crow South. The closet, in this view, comprises the messy ideological adhesive that effectively holds together that which it nevertheless keeps asunder. For example, Ed may not be able to do much about the knowledge other people claim to have regarding his blackness, but the insidious means by which he is made to self-identify as just another “chocolate drop” also require him to give up whatever discretion he might otherwise expect to have over the kinds of knowledge that others very well cannot have of him. As Smith confesses in *Killers of the Dream*, “regardless of statistics, this every one knows: Whenever, wherever, race relations are discussed in the United States, sex moves arm in arm with the concept of segregation.” The grounding of racial difference in the stratified zones of one’s own body is therefore Smith’s bedrock for what she elsewhere calls in *Killers of the Dream* the Southerner’s intransigent “psychic fortifications” (*KD*, 65).

Curiously, however, it is those bodies that happen to be covered with white skin that are said to reproduce in turn the subjugations and hierarchizations at work in the community at large, a point that gets even more comprehensively formulated elsewhere in *Killers of the Dream* when Smith verbalizes the monitory lessons every child is said to silently receive in the South: “‘Now, parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children’” (*KD*, 73). In short, segregation derives its implacable effectiveness from its capacity for mimetic embodiment. It operates in the Jim Crow South by reducing the white Southerner’s body to a strange assimilative mechanism whose boundaries are hard to determine and whose figural and natural processes require a social hermeneutic like that of Smith’s to decipher. As Patricia Yaeger describes it: “For Smith, to be a white southerner is to know and to be the grotesque—to overwrite, overread, and participate in an economy of cruelty, defensiveness, reaction formation, and overcompensation.” At the very least, Smith’s work strives to unveil to her readers a “Colored Town” always already existing in the erogenous zones of the bodies of all white Southerners, thus privileging these bodies as the sites for simultaneously internalizing and externalizing segregation’s relentless enforcement. After all, looming over every such body in *Killers of the Dream* is a sign that reads, “‘Simply remember that morality is based on this mysterious matter of entrances and exits, and Sin hovers over all doors. Also, the authorities are watching’” (*KD*, 74). According to Smith, what goes into and comes out of a white Southerner’s body is necessarily a public and civic matter.
All of this starts to make segregation’s closet look an awful lot like obscenity in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. According to Smith, the Jim Crow South creates complicit subjects out of white Southerners by teaching them to parcel up their bodies just as they are acculturated to parcel up their communities and relationships into a proliferating series of inclusive and exclusive binaries: sanctified/sinful, skin/body, white/black, silence/words. This last binary is of particular interest because it suggests that perhaps segregation operates most effectively when it is least talked about. Just as there are parts of town and parts of the body that must be put in parentheses by white Southerners as they go about their day, the words attached to both of these somatic and topographical areas undergo coercive pressure to remain silent, since their mere expression risks upsetting the whole town and the whole body. As Jay Watson has pithily observed of Killers of the Dream: “Integration becomes the social equivalent of onanism; it boils down to playing with the wrong thing, the thing that must not be recognized as an integral and pleasurable part of you.”

Segregation, like obscenity in Isenstadt, is thus a matter of parts potentially threatening to overwhelm wholes (whole texts, whole bodies, and whole communities), which in turn requires public interdictions and proscriptions against the unruly part in defense of the whole, against the word in favor of silence. The repression of sexuality accordingly facilitates the sexualization of segregation. Quite literally, then, segregation is obscene for Smith:

Out of [the] confusion [created by white fathers who disinherited their mixed-race children] came that obscene word mongrelization and the phrase enforced intimate relations, both of which were mirrors of their own shabby past. Like all criminals, they felt compelled to confess their misdeeds and did so with the naïveté of a child by the use of these words. Now today’s politicians deliberately reach for these worn-out phrases when they need them to stir up excitement and fear and fantasies. (KD, 108)

Now, suddenly, shoving out pleasures and games and stinging questions come the terrors: . . . the songsong voices of politicians who preached their demonic suggestions to us as if elected by Satan to do so: telling us lies about skin color and a culture they were callously ignorant of—lies made of their own fantasies, of their secret deviations—forcing decayed pieces of theirs and the region’s obscenities into the minds of the young and leaving them there to fester. (KD, 2)

In the name of sacred womanhood, of purity, of preserving the home, lecherous old men and young ones, reeking with impurities, who had violated the home since they were sixteen years old, whipped up lynchings, organized Klans, burned crosses, aroused the poor and ignorant to wild excitement by
an obscene, perverse imagery describing the “menace” of Negro men hiding behind every cypress waiting to rape “our” women. (KD, 126)

Obscenity here is a matter of words enacting racial difference through the dangers said to be presented by particular forms of sexual desire: “mongrelization,” “enforced intimate relations,” and “the ‘menace’ of Negro men” to “‘our’ women” are all said to be the properly obscene means by which segregation changes from merely being a thought to becoming behavior. For Smith, the segregating harm done by obscene words derives from their unmanageable capacities for action.

Unlike more recent literary criticism investigating language’s power to do things in the world, Smith believes that the obscene speech acts of segregation are fully intentional and do indeed function just as their speakers, writers, and users intend; in other words, she does not distinguish between the threats posed by segregation’s obscene words and the actions by which those threats would actually be achieved in the world. Segregation’s obscene words thus cannot ever really fail in the speech act theory that Smith tacitly develops in Strange Fruit and Killers of the Dream. Consequently, the possibilities described by Judith Butler for the “performative” to overturn or derail threats posed in language remain unthinkable in Smith’s work. Instead, the obscenity of segregation in Smith’s work functions as pornography does in the essays of Catharine A. MacKinnon because obscenity is not so much a matter of defamation (the obscenity of segregation is not what it says) as it is an instance of discrimination (segregation’s obscenity is harmful because it always does). Consequently, in Smith’s texts the harm to be found in the obscenity of segregation appears to be located in the functions necessarily performed by—not in the contents of—obscene words.

Of the various violent functions performed by these obscene words, perhaps the most troubling ones discussed in Killers of the Dream involve the ways in which such words create what women (black and white) are in the mid-twentieth-century South by framing them in terms of what can and cannot be done to them. For one thing, the only roles to which women can aspire are defined almost exclusively in terms of what kinds of service they can offer to the white men in their lives. As we have seen, the obscene words identified by Smith in her first memoir make a symbol of white women for white men, and this symbol simultaneously denies these women their desires (white women are not individuals with bodies so much as venerated abstractions like “sacred womanhood,” “purity,” or preservers of the home) while it elaborately and paradoxically forbids access to and knowledge of these putatively nonexistent desires (an interdiction mounted against “the ‘menace’ of Negro men”). As for African American women in Smith’s silenced South, obscenity’s words reduce them to mere objects for the contingent whims of white male desire and thus to monstrously productive wombs churning out “mongrels” by the millions.
Extrapolating from all of this, we are presented with the following situation: if, as a pamphleteer and little magazine publisher advocating civil rights in the early 1940s, Smith is able to advise white Southerners that they can do their part for desegregation by empathizing with, making friends with, or simply standing/sitting next to African Americans whenever possible, then as a fiction writer and memoirist she seems to be saying that the problems that racially coded and sexually managed antagonisms raise in the Jim Crow South appear to be too ineluctably determined for human agents to ever confront and meaningfully alter. In *Strange Fruit*, this unduly hard determinism appears most clearly during the almost futile contemplation of paths not taken. Consider the following examples of characters contemplating the wrong turns made in their region's past and in their own:

If [Laura Deen] could go back far enough . . . there'd be a place where she would find a Tracy and a Laura who had been, maybe, fond of each other. Surely if she could get back far enough, she'd find a time when maybe they'd played together as little children and enjoyed each other. And beginning there, she could take his path and travel it until she found out why it led—where it did. And yet she knew that she did not want to do it. If she began to see it, his way, she would travel his path again and again and again, all her life, trying to understand, assuming all he had felt, hurting with his pain. No, it was easier, easier to keep on feeling resentment—or nothing. As he must always have felt toward her. (272)

[Sam Perry, who has just helped Ed escape Maxwell,] turned his car south. Started on the longest journey a man ever makes as he tried to go step by step back through his life and the lives of those nearest him, to find the place where things had taken a wrong turn. Seeking, as children seek in recapitulating play, to master a painful experience, repeating it until it can be summoned back and forth at will. And as he drove on and on from Macon to Maxwell, from fresh early dawn to blazing dead heat, trying to find a way into the past, he kept pushing back a feeling that stole through his body like a soft tune he'd never let himself listen to. It was as if he told himself, “You can't think that now . . . maybe later,” though he told himself nothing. (283)

Better let [the lynching] pass. Let the thing go! Do something [for the next day's newspaper] on the great need for a paved road through the county. Always safe to write about roads. God! [Prentiss Reid] laughed aloud, threw his cigarette into the spittoon.

Yeah . . . [writing an editorial criticizing the lynching would] make folks worse . . . do more harm than good—. . .
That's the South's trouble. Ignorant. Doesn't know anything. Doesn't even know what's happening outside in the world! Shut itself up with its trouble and its ignorance until the two together have gnawed the sense out of it. Believes world was created in six days. Believes white man was created by God to rule the world. As soon believe a nigger was as good as a white man as to believe in evolution. All tied up together. Ignorance. Scared of everything about science, except its gadgets. Afraid not to believe in hell, even. Afraid to be free. (309–10)

Segregation and its obscene words may have repugantly violent effects, but they are an overlapping pair of problems without any likely solution in the 1940s South. If social and race relations are as bad as these passages cumulatively suggest, if the ideological effectiveness of segregation is securely rooted in and enacted throughout a history no Southerner can hope to touch—after all, Prentiss Reid’s thoughts seem to suggest that paving roads to let the world into the South will not efface the tobacco roads in Southerners’ minds—then the only reasonable responses appear to be either hypocritical mutism or science fiction. Either Southerners ought to start acting like their “liberal” press and respond to segregation and lynching with a disapproving silence (just as Prentiss Reid does in Strange Fruit) or they should get busy rewriting their histories so they can adjust (in their imaginations at least) the “wrong” paths taken at some point in the region’s past. In other words, perhaps Jim Crow’s bad history need not bar the narration of alternate, counterfactual histories with their own potentials to disclose or even actualize alternative futures.

III
What these two tacitly opposed responses to segregation in Smith’s texts of the 1940s—hypocritical restraint or alternate histories—present us with are the limits within which Southern liberalism seemed thinkable at that time. Manifestly unsatisfied with the intractability of the problem as framed by her in the 1940s, Smith began in the next decade to address herself in earnest to the possibility of finding and offering new solutions to segregation. At the very least, it was in such a spirit that she undertook The Journey (1954), her second memoir, which is composed of a strange hybrid of genres and modes, including autobiographical writing, travel narratives, and inspirational tracts. The rhetorical gambit of the argument in The Journey is the sustained attempt to pass off Killer of the Dream’s impasses as so many ordeals waiting to be mastered. Increasingly a keyword in her work following her cancer diagnosis in 1953, “ordeal” came to denote for Smith nothing less than the conditions necessary for all distinctly human acts of creativity. Against worldviews that would stress both radical contingency and the incapacity of human agents to have any sort of meaningful effect on the world, Smith’s later writing presents
instead a philosophy of history comfortably rooted in evolution and developmental biology.

To this end, *The Journey* starts to develop an epochal overview of terrestrial history according to which the human species appears as the privileged and as-yet-ever-unfolding product of environmentally instigated ordeals. Human properties and capacities are said to be the hard-won artifacts of evolutionary trials met and effectively surpassed deep in our species’ past, but this should not lead one to assume that all such ordeals have in fact been overcome entirely. In fact, in a case of ontogeny reliably recapitulating phylogeny, even old trials must be met anew by each individual woman and man as she/he develops physically, psychologically, and socially.31 A prized instance of just such an ordeal for Smith in *The Journey* is the one that comes into being in the relationship between mother and child, whereby the resolution of tensions between anxiety and tenderness are understood as helping the “little human animal” to become “a human being”: “Without the anxiety which comes first out of child-helplessness, we would not so desperately need tenderness; without tenderness we could not have found the miraculous talents, the powers, which have changed us into human beings; and once finding them, we would not have developed them further had we not been urged on by necessity and ordeal to dream and bring forth the dream.”32 Said to be more than merely biological matter by virtue of his/her interpersonal self-awareness, the human being comprises the evolutionarily generated result of a self-regulating economy of problems and their immanent solutions, of needs and their imminent satisfaction, and of dreams and their eventual actualization. In particular, the very existence of human beings as such is taken by Smith in *The Journey* to be an irrefutable marker or trace of difficult evolutionary trials overcome as well as an indication that all future ordeals can indeed be successfully mastered. As Smith’s highly selective historical overviews and examples here aim to reveal, anthropogenesis has been and continues to be an experience in the perfectibility of nature.

To be sure, this is not a framework through which many of Smith’s contemporaries sought to approach civil rights activism and desegregation. Yet the earlier vision of the South set forth by her in *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* did indeed encompass the double bind within which many pre-*Brown* Southern liberals saw themselves more and more trapped: full of desperate hopes for the prospects of desegregation and reenfranchisement, yet increasingly driven to treat Jim Crow as the inexorable final result of Southern history to date. Smith’s eventual response to this dilemma in and after *The Journey* was to develop her own philosophy of history rather than to submit to the bad outcomes of history or to offer imagined alternatives to the past, even though both options appealed to many of her fellow liberals at the time.

In order to develop this point, it is worthwhile to consider more closely Gunnar Myrdal’s magnum opus *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern*
Democracy (1944). Though not as expressly deterministic as many comparable works of the period, An American Dilemma nevertheless does refer often to the obdurate persistence of racialist themes in U.S. history and to the obstacles facing those who would strive to overcome them. For instance, in his chapter on the factors underlying the politics of the singular “Negro Problem,” Myrdal alludes to the transhistorical efficacy of white supremacy in unifying white Southerners across regional and class differences into one solid mass of racial animus. At the very least, Myrdal assumes that something like this has been the case in the South since at least just before the Civil War: “In their poverty, ignorance, and dependence, [antebellum poor white Southerners] knew generally little about the world outside the Southern region which was gradually becoming culturally isolated. And they were offered one great and glittering solace: ‘white supremacy.’ They were not at the bottom, they were protected from the status of Negroes by a clear dividing line, and they were told that they could compete freely up to the very top.”33 According to Myrdal, this racial antagonism started to take on a more explicitly political cast in the first years of Reconstruction, with the freedmen being met “with a solid mistrust against them, which was crystallized into an elaborate political philosophy, powerful even in its partial disorganization.”34 On the basis of this Solid South framework, Myrdal is able to make the following incredible claim: “Negro disenfranchisement is evidently part and parcel of a much more general tendency toward political conservatism which stamps the entire region. The Negro is, as we shall find, a main cause of this general conservatism.”35 Though certainly a “complicated matter” subject to longer and more nuanced histories of subjugation and institutionalized oppression—as Myrdal himself demonstrates at length—white Southern attitudes toward African Americans nevertheless appear in An American Dilemma to have solidified into an overwhelming force around the time of the Civil War, the effects of which have been continuously operative and unavoidably felt throughout the South ever since.36

While he tends to interpret racial disenfranchisement in the South in an almost teleological manner, Myrdal still manages to insist that the 1940s presented the United States and the South with a surprisingly volatile situation. Besides the direct assaults on racial disenfranchisement posed by downward pressures on poll taxes and improving education among African Americans, he also notes that there were “various social trends” undermining political discrimination in the South, ranging from the exhaustion of legal defenses against disenfranchisement to the Supreme Court’s increasingly critical perspectives regarding the South’s segregating folkways as well as the greater “respect for the law” to be found more and more often among the region’s youth.37 As farsighted as his prognoses here may in fact be in many respects—in particular, Myrdal’s hunch that the Supreme Court would soon start to take a more interventionist role in legal battles over segregation seems downright prescient—they still carry over into their “solution” some hyperdeterministic
premises. For instance, the effectiveness of “various social trends” in and of themselves are simply taken as given, which raises the question: why would the South’s few scruple-ridden liberals need to adopt more than moderate approaches if these trends were eventually going to work their way toward a satisfactory resolution of their own accord? The situation in which the midcentury Jim Crow South found itself may seem terminally unstable in *An American Dilemma*, but underneath this superficial agitation the terrible racist theme of Southern history appears to remain as hyperbolically determined and determining as ever.

Opposing the quasi-naturalistic reticence of liberal histories in the vein of Myrdal are the alternate, counterfactual histories that became visible in the late 1940s and early 1950s when historians began to burst open those monolithic accounts of the region that presented racial segregation as the unavoidable message of Southern history. Of these historians, C. Vann Woodward remains the figure most famously connected with the overturning of such views of the region’s history, and as such his works are valuable measures by which to assess Smith’s early works in terms of contemporary developments in Southern liberalism. In particular, Woodward’s *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951) and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) did much to stress the discontinuities between the legal institutional arrangements codified in the 1890s and the state of such arrangements immediately following the Civil War. Much like Laura Deen, Sam Perry, or Prentiss Reid in *Strange Fruit*, Woodward sought to go back in time and figure out where the wrong turns had been taken in the region’s past. In *Origins of the New South*, the effort to deny segregation its implacable inevitability in Southern history manifests itself in Woodward’s attacks on the misuse of the expressions “Solid South” and “Bourbon,” both of which are said to be “of questionable value to the historian” because the “solidarity of the region has long been exaggerated.”

Referring specifically to the first years of Reconstruction, Woodward observes that “disaffection had been unnaturally bottled up for a generation—first by the threat of war, then by invasion, and finally by Reconstruction. The Redeemers’ plan to prolong repression by threat of Negro domination and constrain all warring factions within their Procrustean one-party system met with trouble from the start. Independent movements renouncing allegiance to the Democratic party broke out in nearly all Southern states almost as soon as they were redeemed. Boasts of white solidarity that impressed outsiders were often loudest in the presence of division.” Far from being the motive force of Southern history, post–Civil War white supremacy was simply another myth that latter-day historians of the region needed to interrogate more critically than they had hitherto. Instead, for Woodward the narrative of what occurred in the South between 1865 and the 1890s was full of more variable and ambiguous outcomes than Myrdal seemed willing to consider.
In many ways, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* simply overlays Woodward's arguments about disenfranchisement in *Origins of the New South* onto the even more vexing issues raised by segregation. To this end, the second chapter of *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* attempts to map out three “forgotten alternatives” to the institutionalization of racism that Woodward sees as having occurred in the 1890s: Southern radicalism, conservative philosophy, and a liberal philosophy of race relations that in his view constitute “alternative philosophies [that] rejected the doctrines of extreme racism and all three were indigenously and thoroughly Southern in origin.” As exemplary figures of nineteenth-century Southern liberalism, Woodward singles out George Washington Cable and Lewis Harvie Blair before admitting that “neither Harvie nor Cable attracted a following in the South. Acceptance of their doctrines had to await the development of urban liberalism, which did not arrive in any force until the second quarter of the twentieth century.” Pitched somewhere between “the doctrinaire Negrophile of the left and the fanatical Negrophobe of the right,” nineteenth-century Southern conservatism exerted a much more substantial influence on the region's history than did the sparse record left by its few contemporary liberals (*SC*, 47). According to Woodward, the forgotten alternatives suggested by the history of conservatism in the South merely qualified the more violent aspects of white supremacy: “The conservatives acknowledged that the Negroes belonged in a subordinate role, but denied that subordinates had to be ostracized; they believed that the Negro was inferior, but denied that it followed that inferiors must be segregated or publicly humiliated” (*SC*, 48). Not forms of white supremacy per se but rather “an aristocratic philosophy and noblesse oblige” were all that such conservatism necessitated (*SC*, 49). In this paternalistic view, African Americans were to have been protected, not degraded by their “superior” white neighbors and fellow citizens.

Given these shortcomings of both Southern liberalism and Southern conservatism in the nineteenth century, the forgotten alternative most favored by Woodward is that of Southern radicalism, best emblematized for him by the Populist movement, which presented the South with a perspective on race that went beyond “the delusions and sentimental liberalism on the one hand, and the illusions of romantic paternalism on the other.” Instead, it opened up the prospect of interracial class alliances *in spite of* existing racial prejudices: “There was in the Populist approach to the Negro a limited type of equalitarianism quite different from that preached by the radical Republicans and wholly absent from the conservative approach. This was an equalitarianism of want and poverty, the kinship of a common grievance and a common oppressor” (*SC*, 61). Thus, at the end of his succinct survey of the achievements of Populism, Woodward goes so far as to contend: “It is altogether probable that during the brief Populist upheaval of the ’nineties Negroes and native whites achieved a greater comity of mind and harmony of political purpose than ever before or since in the South” (*SC*, 64). As Woodward hastens to point out,
however, his reasons for exhuming these neglected alternatives to Jim Crow are not to celebrate Populism above all other political movements and tendencies in the South’s past. Instead, the point here is simply “to indicate that things have not always been the same in the South.” In other words, “the effort to justify them as a consequence of Reconstruction and a necessity of the times is embarrassed by the fact that they did not originate in those times. And the belief that they are immutable and unchangeable is not supported by history” (SC, 65). Racism in the South’s past was therefore not so much an endlessly recurring fact as it was a contingent, albeit powerful force to which the region regrettably capitulated in the 1890s when social alternatives to it wavered in the restraints each offered (SC, 67–109). As the work of historians following in this vein has since tried to demonstrate, the region’s past is filled with “might-have-beens” that could very well have been the case, and at the heart of this project has long been the tacit claim that counterfactual histories make qualitative changes in the present more (not less) possible.42

As we have seen, Smith’s two major works of the 1940s—Strange Fruit and Killers of the Dream—provide us with a body of work narrating the transition from the overly determined assumptions of Myrdal to the alternatives opened up by the likes of Woodward.43 Smith, therefore, is a bridge in the history of liberalism and the South, and her mediating functions in this respect are to be understood as encompassing both her fiction and her activist writing. If Strange Fruit seems almost implacable in the ways in which it preemptively forecloses the solutions adverted to later in Killers of the Dream, then the clanging shut of the doors on Jim Crow’s closet does not necessarily preclude the impulse for qualitative change, an impulse that manifests itself in Smith’s first novel in the form of privately expressed desires for counterfactual histories promising alternative futures. This is an impulse that quite explicitly informs Woodward’s work of the early 1950s, which itself evocatively altered the ways in which Southern history was conceivable at a time when social reform was not only institutionally motivated by Supreme Court rulings such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954) but also collectively demanded and achieved in ways entirely unthinkable in the terms assumed by Strange Fruit, where mass politics means lynchings, not sit-ins or marches or freedom rides.44 This does not detract from the significance of Smith’s first novel as a missing link of sorts in the history of Southern liberalism, however, because while it abstains from offering the sorts of solutions that the first edition of Killers of the Dream tentatively rehearses or that civil rights activism after Brown later opens up, Strange Fruit nevertheless does do an estimable job of unveiling the deterministic premises of works like Myrdal’s book. Strange Fruit is, as it were, a baring of the racialist device within the work of liberals faced with the problems of the South in the 1940s, liberals who nevertheless remained committed to seeing—if not necessarily to making—Jim Crow’s strange career come to an end somehow.
A similar and significant distinction insinuates itself as well between the courses charted out by Woodward and the idiosyncratic one followed by Smith in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas the clarifying functions of alternate histories allow Woodward to commit himself fully to confronting racism and its discourses in all their muddled particularity, the opening of such alternatives permits Smith in her later work to retire to somewhat rarefied heights, just as the civil rights movement propagated rapidly. Unlike Woodward, Smith in the 1950s did not go on to debunk the implacability of racialist ideologies by means of a new reading of Southern history; instead, she set out to express totalizing humanist worldviews with which to efface them. As she points out in a 1965 letter:

I am involved with segregation that is symbol and symptom of this dehumanization; but this “segregation” is bigger than race, [sic] (conformity is also a form of segregation); it has to do with numberless relationships that are necessary not only to bind men into one world but necessary for their increasing complexity of mind and spirit as they continue to evolve themselves into human beings. I am talking about the things Teilhard de Chardin talked about, not the things Walter White talked about in his day or James Baldwin and LeRoi [sic] Jones are talking about now.45

For Smith, “segregation” symptomatically and symbolically refers to a truly sublime set of associations, ranging from the localized and ephemeral matters pertaining to the prospects of desegregation in the mid-century U.S. South all the way up to the cosmic evolutionary destiny of the human being as such. Perhaps even more strikingly, however, she insists here that if the struggle for racial desegregation has any meaning at all, then that meaning must be understood to derive from the small part it plays in the further integration of man’s species-being (in overcoming “dehumanization”). Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s The Phenomenon of Man—but not LeRoi Jones’s Dutchman (1964)—was the key to conceptually reorganizing the repugnant contingencies of racial segregation in the United States into a totalizing and compelling whole because the stakes of Smith’s writing and activism are said to be nothing less than the development or the regression of the entire species.

It is thus not in the least surprising that when she encountered The Phenomenon of Man in the late 1950s and early 1960s Smith did so with all the force of recognition. Indelibly persuaded by (because she already shared) the promissory mood in which this Jesuit paleontologist approaches evolution, Smith attempts in her 1961 revised conclusion to Killers of the Dream to refigure her life’s work in the mythic and reassuringly teleological terms of Phenomenon of Man because her work, if it meant and would continue to mean anything, is said to have done its utmost to “count in the project called Human Being Evolving. And as we think of what could
happen to the human race, if we want it to happen, when we think of the billions of dormant seeds in our nature and culture awaiting warmth and cultivation, we find ourselves ready to pick up our little watering-pot and sacks of rich soil and start out on the million-year plan for the growing of a New Man” (KD, 214). Countering those who would either converse rationally with individual human beings or appeal demagogically to the masses, Smith sees her life’s work as bridging the gap between myth and reason through its commitment to expressing a materialism fully compatible with faith: “For neither the faith that [our fathers] leaned on nor the doubt which drove us to overvalue science can make a future fit for men. No more than ovum or sperm alone creates the child. Faith and doubt both are needed—not as antagonists but working side by side—to take us around the unknown curve.”

What present times urgently require, Smith argues, are new rationally presented myths capable of fostering and thereafter sustaining a sense of community among the entire human race. With its faux-scientific jargon (hominisation, noogenesis, noosphere, psychergy, etc.) and its invitingly inclusive views of evolution as fundamentally antientropic and human-affirming, Chardin’s Phenomenon of Man provides Smith not only with the means for shaping such myths for her fellow Southerners but also with the missing plank necessary for finally joining together her split projects as a writer and an activist. Casting her glance back over her life, Smith discovered that she was in fact a proto–Teilhard de Chardin all along. Not civil rights but the lure of the evolutionarily elected human being spreading its integrated and integrating consciousness across the universe had been the grand mythical subject of her activism and her writing every step of the way, thus making Georgia’s Strange Fruit just another exemplary instance of the universe’s phenomenon of man.

Smith’s late evolutionary evangelism accordingly makes the region’s problems seem far too limited in scope to qualify as a valid case study on which to base any philosophy of history as pitilessly immobilizing as the one intimated in Strange Fruit. Instead, the real object of history in Smith’s later important works, such as The Journey, becomes the millennia-spanning story of the human species, which also happens to read like a determinist narrative, albeit one with a more promisingly open ending. As Smith herself puts it in The Journey:

To believe in something not yet proved and to underwrite it with our lives: it is the only way we can leave the future open. Man, surrounded by facts, permitting himself no surmise, no intuitive flash, no great hypothesis, no risk is in a locked cell. Ignorance cannot seal the mind and imagination more surely. To find the point where hypothesis and fact meet; the delicate equilibrium between dream and reality; the place where fantasy and earthly things are metamorphosed into a work of art; the hour when faith in the future becomes
knowledge of the past; to lay down one’s power for others in need; to shake off the old ordeal and get ready for the new; to question, knowing that never can the full answer be found; to accept uncertainties quietly, even our incomplete knowledge of God: this is what man’s journey is about, I think. ⁴⁷

Consequently, the way in which Smith seeks to open up the South to a different future is to superimpose the species’ history onto that of the region (“the point where hypothesis and fact meet”), an example that none of her fellow liberals seemed all that willing to follow, though W. E. B. Du Bois appears to have been the first to anticipate Smith’s later evolutionary turn. In his review of Strange Fruit, he prophetically notes: “On each page the reader sees how both elements (white and black) in Maxwell are caught in a skein (economic, ethnic, emotional) that only evolution can untangle or revolution break.” ⁴⁸ Much like the examples made by Cable and Blair in Woodward’s Origins of the New South, Smith’s opting for the former did not attract much of a following among her contemporaries; unlike them, however, it remains doubtful that it ever will, at least so long as something like an interplanetary liberalism answering to their urban liberalism remains indiscernible on our horizon. Likewise, it is a wonder that Smith’s shift in focus to the species did not also produce the slightest engagement with science fiction, especially in the vein of Olaf Stapledon’s Last and First Men (1930) or H. G. Wells’s The Shape of Things to Come (1933).

Along with this consequential shift in deterministic perspective comes a perhaps even more significant modification in the capacities of words to do things to people. As we have seen, Strange Fruit and Killers of the Dream both ground Southern segregation in obscene words and their complementary silences. Smith never really forgets this troubling feature that her early work obsessively explores, even after she starts to discern a way out for the region in the alternative perspectives provided by anthropogenesis. Consequently, much of her writing in the 1950s and 1960s concerns itself with neutralizing the effects that segregation’s obscene words have had by rendering those words ambiguous. Instead of speech acts, segregation becomes just another instance of polysemy, of signs indefinite enough to suggest hidden contents just below their hazy surface. In short, Smith strives to make segregation symptomatic and allegorical instead of obscene. Accordingly, the South’s alternate history that Smith claims to have discovered in something “bigger than race” does not just provide her with the conceptual means of overcoming the region’s “bad” determinism. It also enables her to undermine the power of segregation’s obscene words by translating them into less effective ones. Segregation need not endlessly create and re-create the segregated South’s closet through obscenity; instead, it can be rendered as “dehumanization,” a term that in turn symbolically refers us to the ordeals—but not to the tragic fated outcomes—of the human race.
over the course of its epochal history on this planet. Thus, in Smith's later work, racial segregation in the region is best understood in terms of the Anthropocene, rather than the Jim Crow era. Likewise, segregation's obscene words are to be approached in other words altogether so as to conjure away their traumatic barbs, gashes, and deformations.

Smith's late philosophy of history thus attempts to invert the holistic test for obscenity described in *Commonwealth v. Isenstadt*. That is to say, instead of trying to protect the whole from its potentially overwhelming parts, she takes as her measure later in life an abstract whole (the human race) in which no present part (racialist race) can ever really hope to predominate. Smith's turn to man's evolutionary prospects does not so much indicate that she breaks with the past but rather implies an even more fundamental desire for continuity: human evolution provides a precedent for overcoming dehumanization (formerly known as “segregation”) because it is the story of how humans of all generations are progressively becoming still more and more human. Therefore, if there was an authority to which Smith could refer in assessing the prospects for civil rights in the Jim Crow South in the late 1950s and early 1960s, then that authority was to be found in the stability supposedly underlying anthropocentrism itself. In other words, Smith's evolutionary turn does not totally efface the obscenity of her early writings. If anything, her leap from race and region to species and cosmos marks an even deeper (if hidden) engagement with segregation's obscenity, for she, like the South's racist politicians, cannot help making “dehumanization” an obscene word just like the obscene words of segregation. As we have seen, “sacred womanhood,” “purity,” and “preservers of the home” were the words that framed what white women in the South were in terms of what could and could not be done to them. They apparently did not have desires of their own because they were little more than disembodied abstractions for the region's white men. Similarly, Smith's later deployment of the language of dehumanization reduces us all to our abstract taxonomic essence: we are not lesbians, Southerners, Americans, liberals, conservatives, fascists, proles, fellow travelers, scabs, communists, or any other likely form of personal or group identity; instead, we are each of us, symptomatically and symbolically, just humans, singular but equivalent exemplars of *homo sapiens*. If we read this process of allegorical abstraction obscenely—that is, if we remain attentive to the ways in which obscenity discriminates through words—then Smith's solution to Southern segregation seems downright demagogic because what that solution appears to entail at the end of the day is the making of a white woman out of everyone everywhere always.