

CARSON McCULLERS AND LILLIAN SMITH: THE INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND RACE IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH¹

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ABSTRACT. *Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith openly rejected a false conception of loyalty to fantasies like southern tradition or white supremacy, a loyalty that veiled a persistent lack of self-analysis. They exposed the cracks in the South's pretended "unity" and homogeneity and criticized the self-destructive resistance to acknowledge that, as a socially constructed category, race is linked to relations of power and anticipated the instability of racial categorization that would be underscored by historical and scientific research later in their century. These two southern women writers opposed the insistence of their culture on racial purity as vehemently as its demands for rigid sexual definition and its suppression of any deviant form of sexuality. The characters in their fiction are victims of a dichotomic culture that resists the acknowledgement that black and white have always been as inextricably linked as male and female.*

In Killers of the Dream and Strange Fruit, Lillian Smith showed the interactions of racial and sexual segregation, which she saw as parallel emblems of the South's cultural schizophrenia. She was one of the first to detect the psychosexual damage inflicted on southern women by the racial discourse, and established a most interesting parallel between the segregated parts of the female body and the segregated spaces of any southern locality. Like any system of differentiation, segregation shapes those it privileges as well as those it oppresses. Excluded from the white parameters of virtue and even from the condition of womanhood, the black woman's body became the sexual prey of the white man who could not demand sexual satisfaction from his "pure" wife. The culture of segregation privileged the white woman but it also made her powerless; the very conventions which "protected" her deprived her of contact with physicality and locked her into bodilessness.

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The history of gender and race relations in the American South is very long and very complex. The Civil War (1861-65) put an end to slavery and to the social order derived from it, but white men would spend the next century trying to restore the racial and gender hierarchy that had existed in the South prior to the conflict. White southerners lost the war but they fought tooth and nail to maintain their superiority over blacks. In the days of slavery, whites not only *felt* superior; the laws and institutions of their society confirmed their superiority. After the Civil War whites could not enslave blacks again, so they devised new laws and institutions to limit the freedom of former slaves, to maintain the master-slave relationship in new forms. In the Reconstruction era (1865-77) a fierce battle was waged over who would rule the blacks, and who would rule the South. White southerners won on both counts and they made themselves believe that they had “redeemed” the South from Yankee rule and black ruin. Another chapter in that cherished book of the South entitled *The Lost Cause* was written. It read more or less as follows: blacks, once free from the “moral order of slavery”, fell back into the barbarism of their African ancestors; the Reconstruction policies of the Federal Government tolerated this anarchy until white southerners rose up to save themselves and their civilization. The title of the new chapter was “The South Redeemed”. For the blacks the new chapter read ominously, as Du Bois (1935: 30) put it in 1877: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery”. History, as re-written by white southerners, trivialized and condemned every black aspiration or effort. It was a history that for a whole century justified white supremacy, racial segregation, disfranchisement, lynching and the denial of all economic and civil rights to blacks. Southern political leaders soon realized that white supremacy was a very invigorating drug for whites because it gave them an automatic superiority. Mr. Poor White could be destitute and go hungry but Mr. Rich White was always ready to remind him that he had the South’s most precious possession: whiteness. A bargain was struck: Mr. Rich White would control the money and Mr. Poor White would control the blacks. Whatever misfortune might occur in his life, the white southerner would never be a “nigger”. The idea of the black man or woman as his or her own master could not be tolerated. White individuals could not be masters, but as a collective, they could, and that masterhood required a publicly visible separation of the races. The racializing of spaces became indispensable to keep blacks in their place. “White”/“Colored” signs went up in all public facilities, words that for blacks indicated not just separation but inferiority and impurity.²

2. Among the most influential explanations of the origins and function of segregation are J. W. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941) and Lillian Smith, “Two men and a Bargain: A Parable of the solid South” (1943). Smith’s essay appeared in slightly different form in her book *Killers of the Dream* (Chapter 2 of part 3).

Gender is intricately related to race in the re-writing of southern history. The white version of southern history created a new enemy, the black male. This enemy enabled white men to fulfil their role as guardians of white women, a role that had gone with the wind during the Civil War. The sublimation of the pure white woman elevated the white man to the noble role of protector, at the same time establishing the necessity to keep blacks “in their place”. Sexuality connected gender and race: white men became the defenders of innocent white women threatened by sexually aggressive black males. The raising of white women to ideal levels of purity demanded, in turn, the emasculation of the black male. The Old South patriarchy was thus brought back, and the South produced yet another myth: the black beast rapist. Rape became an obsession with southern white males after the Civil War, and the rape myth played a central role in the reinvention of race and gender relations, in the firm reinscription of the definitions of blackness and whiteness in the Reconstruction period. According to the myth, black men, no longer controlled by that admirable institution called slavery, were going to revert to their basic African instincts, the most prevalent of which was their insatiable sexual appetite, especially for white women. The rape myth was the justification for many of the horrific lynchings of blacks in the darkest days of segregation.³

Fiction was logically a major tool for this ideological construct. One of the major influences was Thomas Dixon, who glorified the Ku Klux Klan in a trilogy of radically racist novels set in the Reconstruction period: *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907). Dixon popularized the idea that the Klan was the savior of southern white civilization. His ideas reached a wide audience in the South, and in the whole nation, with the release of the spectacular film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by the southerner David W. Griffith. The film, based mainly on Dixon's play *The Clansman*, suggests that the presence of blacks in America caused divisions between white northerners and southerners. The enemy, the “free blacks”, has to be suppressed in order to heal the division. The Klan is presented as necessary to free the nation of the threat of the evil Negro, who is bent on stealing power from the whites and on taking revenge by raping white women. The idea of the Negro as inferior and childish had given way to the much more brutal motif of the negro as “beast”, as the untamed savage, the oversexed rapist who threatens the survival of the pure white race. The loss of the racial ease of the plantation days had been the fault of African Americans. Segregation was, then, inevitable, as the black beast rapist had no place in twentieth-century southern life. White audiences were thus convinced

3. For the myth of the black beast rapist see Williamson (1984: 306-310). For the causes of lynching and its turning into modern spectacle see Hale (1999: chapter 5).

that the white vigilantes of the Klan were on a mission to save the nation from the threat of the black beast. Dixon's novels and Griffith's movie justified segregation as something inevitable which should be blamed on the blacks. The film brought about national reconciliation – a new Anglo-Saxon nation was born and it excluded the violent black rapist. Only the white South, not the freed blacks, would become a part of the modern American nation.

The book and the film versions of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* made white southernness a national bestseller (the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1937 and sold a million copies in the first six months; the movie [1939] still is, adjusted for inflation, the most profitable movie ever made). In *Gone with the Wind* (1936), the Klan is portrayed as a southern defence against the excesses of Reconstruction. Mitchell was one of the white writers who narrated emancipation as bringing only confusion and pain to African Americans, who gave accounts of Reconstruction in which blacks are either passive victims of white manipulation or unthinking people with animal natures. In *Gone with the Wind*, blacks are either faithful to the noble master (Pork, Mammy, Sam and Prissy, despite emancipation, refuse to leave their masters and mistresses) or beasts like the one who tried to rape Scarlett (made white in the movie version). The film version of *Gone with the Wind* made the Old South the entire white nation's past; and the story of Scarlett and her Tara, a welcome spectacle of survival for a nation still in the throes of the Depression (Hale 1999: 277-278).

In her last novel, *Clock without Hands* (1961), Carson McCullers focuses, to a greater degree than in previous works, on the political and ideological factors of a South divided between those who promote and those who resist change. The Old South is represented by the white supremacist Judge Clane, who cannot conceive of a future for the South in which "delicate little white girls must share their desks with coal black niggers in order to learn to read and write" (McCullers 1965: 17). In his violent and self-destructive attempt to stop the hands of the clock bringing irrevocable change to the South, the Judge insists that naturally a black and a white man "are two different things", that "[w]hite is white and black is black – and never the two shall meet if I can prevent it" (39-40). Clane's defeat at the hands of the progressive forces reflects the process by which the white South in the 1940s and '50s was beginning to see that its homogeneity was not only being threatened but also proving illusory. It was during this period that Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith gained prominence as southern white writers. They were both from the state of Georgia and admired each other's work. They shared the common goal of rejecting a false conception of loyalty to fantasies like southern tradition or white supremacy, a loyalty that concealed a persistent lack

of self-scrutiny. They exposed the cracks in the South's pretended "unity", cracks which had always existed and could not be concealed much longer by the plaster of myth and legend. They tried to make southerners see that the myth of absolute racial difference could no longer be sustained, and that this myth was harmful to both blacks and whites. Their stand against segregation, together with their unconventional sexuality, incurred the harsh criticism, even the scorn, of many conservative southerners.

Carson McCullers's obsessive theme was isolation, and she was persuaded that two of the main barriers to self-expression were the monolithic conceptions of race and sexuality that characterized her cultural milieu. In her fiction she frequently dealt, implicitly or explicitly, with the connection between the subjection of blacks and the oppression of women in the South. All her life McCullers (1999: 62) had a sharpened sensitivity to social reform, and her opposition to the discrimination of blacks, which was for her one of "certain hideous aspects of the South", was so fierce that she identified the southern social system with Hitler's Germany. In her autobiography she tenderly remembers a fourteen-year old black cook of the family being refused a ride by a taxi driver who bawled, "I'm not driving no damn nigger" (54). She remembers those Depression days in which she was "exposed so much to the sight of humiliation and brutality, not physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity, which is even worse" (56). The black novelist Richard Wright (1940: 195) praised McCullers for being the first white writer "to handle Negro characters with as much care and justice as those of her own race", for allowing them to express themselves as complex human beings beneath the prevailing stereotypes.

McCullers was sexually ambivalent all her life, and she frequently identified with the "masculine", which she considered more real than the feminine in her own person. In the summer of 1941, when she was writing *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, a novella about the tragic life of an unfeminine woman, the author confessed to her friend the writer Newton Arvin: "Newton, I was born a man" (Carr 1977: 159). She made friends with openly gay writers like H. W. Auden and Tennessee Williams. As her biographer Virginia Carr has amply documented, Carson as a young girl was very much as she described her two famous tomboys Mick Kelly, from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), and Frankie Addams, from *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). She was terrified by her excessive growth and preferred dirty tennis shoes or brown oxfords while other girls were wearing hose and shoes with dainty heels, and she was ridiculed for wearing slacks, straight hair and bangs (Carr 1977: 29-30). Sex, especially if it was heterosexual, was terrifying for her and she was convinced that it increased the isolation of the individual.

McCullers opposed the insistence of southern culture on racial “purity” and the oppression of blacks as adamantly as she did its demands for rigid sexual definition and the oppression of any deviant form of sexuality. She was persuaded that just as “blackness” and “whiteness” coexist within individuals of both races,⁴ so too can femininity and masculinity be found equally within men and women. Many of McCullers’s characters are defeated by not being allowed to adequately express both sides of the male/female polarity.

Raised to be a southern lady, Lillian Smith understood perfectly well the practices and the contradictions of the southern social system, and in her writings she set out to heal the splits in the grand edifice of southern tradition. Her life was a constant transgression of the rules set for white women, who were trying to write themselves out of a kind of segregation, a situation that relegated them to powerlessness. They had to expose the contradiction of a system that privileged them as whites, but silenced and repressed them as women. She remained unmarried and had a lesbian relationship with Paula Snelling, the friend with whom she edited a magazine and ran the Laurel Falls Camp for girls in Rabun County, in the mountains of northern Georgia. Throughout her life Smith urged southern women to fight racial segregation as well as their confinement to the pedestal which kept them marginalized from so many things. Most critics of Smith agree that the isolation and exclusion that she experienced in the South as a result of her lesbianism contributed greatly to her impatience with the oppression of blacks as well as with all discourses of power and oppressive ideologies. Having to live a secret life with another woman “segregated” her, made her an outsider in the South, and this gave her a special sensitivity to the excluded race, the South’s inescapable “other”. A woman frequently dismissed as “odd”, Smith saw herself reflected in those whose “difference” in color prevented them from expressing their thoughts or living out their deepest feelings.

The Member of the Wedding is the novel in which McCullers most explicitly explores the parallel between society’s stereotypical conceptions of gender and the oppression of blacks. The emphasis is on the protagonist’s traumatic crisis that results from confronting the dangers that she perceives in conventional femininity.

4. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers included a scene which exposes the absurdity of categorizing individuals according to monolithic notions of racial identity. When the white Marxist agitator Jake Blount brings the black doctor Copeland into the New York Café, he is confronted by the white patrons: “Don’t you know you can’t bring no nigger in a place where white men drink?” Blount says defiantly, “I’m part nigger myself”, and later, “I’m part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those. [...] And I’m Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American” (McCullers 1961: 24). Here McCullers is using the metaphorical power of miscegenation to subvert myths of racial and personal identity. Many of McCullers’s most sympathetic characters either have mixed blood or wish they did.

Frankie is on a threshold oscillating between the freedom of childhood and the clearly defined sexual world of adults that she is reluctantly being forced to enter. Being a girl excludes her from a war that she romanticizes, and she is not even allowed to donate blood for the soldiers to carry in their veins: “she wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people” (McCullers 1962: 31). The implication is that if mixed blood allows connection and kinship with people “all over the world”, the southern obsession with pure blood can only mean alienation and stagnation.

Frankie’s unwillingness to enter the restrictive world of womanhood is manifested through the dream of androgyny, frequent in female protagonists when they are no longer allowed a tomboy’s freedom to transgress gender boundaries and display “male” attitudes. In women’s fiction the sexual ambivalence of the androgyne acts as a symbolic means of transcending the bounds imposed on feminine identity in a phallic-centric culture which defines femininity in restrictive biological terms and ties it to passive sexuality and self-sacrificing maternity. When Frankie plays with her black nanny Berenice and her six-year-old cousin John Henry at being creators, she projects a world in which “people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted”. But Berenice insists that “the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved” (116). Deep down Frankie knows that sex is only reversible in the realm of fantasy or in children’s play, as in the socially accepted cross-dressing of her cousin John Henry; she knows that her dream is impossible in the real world where androgyny is an aberrant anomaly and the Half-Man Half-Woman is one of the freaks at the fair. This is precisely the attraction that most impresses Frankie and also the one she fears most because it speaks of the danger of not fitting in with the stereotypical roles sanctioned by the culture. While Frankie dreams of an avenue of escape from fixed sexual definitions, Berenice’s ideal would be a society without racialized differences, free from the oppressive polarity black/white. In the world she would create “there would be no separate coloured people [...] but all human beings would be light brown colour with blue eyes and black hair. There would be no coloured people and no white people to make the coloured people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives” (114-115).

Frankie’s mirror in the novel is Berenice’s half-brother, the black adolescent Honey Brown. Trapped in the claustrophobic close quarters of racial oppression and poverty, he echoes the situation of Frankie trapped in the stagnant small town that imposes on her a paralyzing femininity. Honey, like Frankie, puts up a struggle against conformity and defies racial and sexual categories. In appearance and

aspirations he is culturally androgynous like Frankie. He is sexually ambivalent and “light-skinned” (155) and “could talk like a white school-teacher” (48); he has musical talents and wants to learn French but social constraints deny him fulfillment. Both Frankie and Honey are “unfinished” and “caught”. Berenice says that “they done drawn completely extra bounds around all coloured people. [...] Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can’t breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself” (141). Feeling confined by the bounds that forbid tomboyishness and female ambition, Frankie explicitly identifies herself with Honey in her struggle against conformity: “Sometimes I feel like I want to break something, too” (142). But society will not tolerate nonconformists within its categories of race and gender. At the end, Honey Brown is put in jail and Frankie has renounced most of her dreams and lost most of her ambitions and originality. The dream of transcendence and androgyny has been crushed by a dichotomic culture that persists in remaining blind to the fact that black and white have always been as inextricably linked as male and female, that, as Jenkins (1999: 191) says, “white is defined by the existence of black, not just *opposite* it but *within* it as well, and vice versa”.

According to Virginia Durr, an associate of Lillian Smith in the fight against segregation, there were only “three ways for a well-bought-up young Southern white woman to go”. She could conform and be “the actress” that plays out “the stereotype of the Southern belle” (the equivalent of “going with the wind”); if she was independent and creative, she could go crazy; or she could rebel, that is, to “step outside the magic circle, abandon privilege, and challenge this way of life” (Turkel 1985: xi). Lillian Smith chose the third alternative and became one of the fiercest critics of the racially segregated South. She was one of the first white southerners of her generation to speak out so bravely against those aspects of southern society that brought shame to the American nation. For her, literature was not just an aesthetic endeavour but also a tool for her political agenda, and it had a crucial role to play in helping the South find a solution to its racial and economic problems. In recent years critics have emphasized Smith’s amazing insights into the relationships between racial and sexual discrimination, not only in the American South, but in the whole of Western culture. She denounced the attitudes of her society toward sexuality and racial segregation as pernicious both to men and women, blacks and whites, as a deadly virus that threatened the very fabric of society as a whole. Smith saw herself involved in a political struggle over the future of the American nation. The treatment of blacks and women was at the heart of that struggle and, as Diane Roberts (1994: 181) notes, Smith “saw integration as the moral way out of the radical division of American culture into categories of black and white, polluted and pure, low and high”. The struggle seems to be always connected to bodies, to how bodies are represented, defined,

assigned spaces. Like McCullers, Smith set herself the task of exposing and subverting the false oppositions of black and white, male and female, and in her works she put forth an integrationist vision. Her two best and most influential works are the novel *Strange Fruit* (1944) and the autobiographical non-fiction book *Killers of the Dream* (1949, rev. ed. 1961). In this last study, with a long section on the psychosexual damage that racial discourse inflicts on the southern woman, Lillian Smith anticipated the work of future scholars.

Strange Fruit is Smith's most daring dramatization of the tragic consequences of segregation and the notion of white supremacy for both blacks and whites, in the fictional town of Maxwell, Georgia. The South that she paints is cruel, ignorant, and cowardly, an environment whose inhabitants are the "strange fruit" produced by a dehumanizing system of racial prejudice. With this novel, Smith attempted to shake, as hard as possible, the system of segregation and its ideology of racial, gender, and bodily division, at a time when the whites' needs for definition were getting hysterical. At the center of the plot she placed the most taboo of all southern subjects, miscegenation. The main character is the white youth Tracy Dean, from one of the town's prominent families. During his service in World War I in Marseille, he realizes that he loves the black girl Nonnie Anderson, with whom he has had a secret relationship of several years. Marseille "was as different from Maxwell as two places can be different" (Smith 1992: 49), and the self that he dared not disclose back home has there a vision in which the Nonnie who "had been something you tried not to think about – something you needed, took when you needed, hushed your mind from remembering" ceases to be just "a Negro girl whom he had in a strange crazy way mixed his whole life up with", to become "the woman he loved" (50). But on his return home Tracy faces the impenetrable walls of southern prejudice and tradition, and he is unable to relate to her except in terms of the racial beliefs and codes he learned as a child. The privileges of being white and male allow him to have sexual relations with Nonnie, but racial restrictions forbid him to love and to acknowledge her. In the South "there are signs everywhere. *White ... colored ... white ... colored*" (Smith 1994: 95) indicating and enforcing racial hierarchy and allowing only certain bodies into certain spaces. The very layout of the town speaks of these rigid color definitions: Maxwell is bisected into two different worlds: Colored Town and White Town. Blacks go to White Town to work as house servants or laborers; whites, always males, go to Black Town to get sex from black women, since these are accessible and white belles and ladies are not. As Preacher Dunwoodie instructs Tracy, many white youths prefer the pleasures of Colored Town to marriage because they are "[s]cared of white girls. Scared nice white girls can't satisfy them. And they're right! Of course no decent fine white woman can satisfy you when you let your mind out like you let out a team of wild

mules racing straight to –” (Smith 1992: 87). Sexuality is black and dirty, and purity is white. The Preacher actually doubts “if a nigger woman can live a decent, respectable life” (88). But boundaries are never fixed and always apt to be transgressed. Actually Tracy thinks about his black girl: “*In the dusk she’s as white as [his sister] Laura. God, if she weren’t a nigger*” (7). Nonnie, repeatedly described as “white”, has a college education and is as attractive and stylish as any white girl. She is aware that race is a mere social convention: “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” (95). In *Strange Fruit* Smith destabilizes the dichotomy white/black, the binary of the elevated white body and the degraded black one. The novel opens: “She stood at the gate, waiting; behind her the swamp, in front of her Colored Town, beyond it, all Maxwell. Tall and slim and *white in the dusk*, the girl stood there, hands on the picked gate” (1; emphasis mine). The “tall and slim and white” girl, whom later the reader knows to be a light-skinned African American, is repeatedly described as “white” and has “a face that God knows by right should have belonged to a white girl” (2). Nonnie makes her first appearance in a white dress, thus appropriating another major sign of white female purity. If black can be white, white can be black too, as when Nonnie’s sister Bess sees in dreams Tracy’s hand, “[w]hite, with black hairs across it – touching the dirty [cabin] floor, touching her sister” (18).

Tracy’s attraction to a black girl and the violation of class and color conventions in Nonnie’s character constitute a threat to the discourses of segregation that prohibit the touching of black and white. Tracy represents the uncertain beginnings of a more tolerant South, a new generation that feels the oppression and limitations of the color barrier. But he is too weak to resist the codes of a culture of uncompromising absolutes: “You can’t love and respect a colored girl. No, you can’t. But you do. If you do – then there must be something bad wrong with you”. And Tracy uses the comparison between racial and sexual segregation that the author would develop in *Killers of the Dream*: “It’s like playing with your body when you were a kid. You had to touch yourself. It felt good. It was good. But everyone told you it wasn’t good” (97). The obsession with controlling sexuality paralyzes not only Tracy but the whole town. It is this cultural schizophrenia that eventually leads to tragedy in the doomed lives of Nonnie and Tracy. Tracy loses the battle when he thinks of Nonnie as a colored girl, instead of the woman he loves, when he allows society’s definitions of his and Nonnie’s relationship to destroy it. There are moments when Tracy and Nonnie resist the barriers, but they are inevitably pulled back into the culture of segregation by some word or thought that releases deeply ingrained feelings of prejudice: “*Colored girl. Negro*. Spoiling every moment, like a hair that’s got into

your food. Why under God's heaven did he keep on thinking those damned words!" (142). Psychologically weak, Tracy is unable to resist the pressure of his mother and the revivalist preacher Dunwoodie to join the church, marry the rich white girl next door, and take the path of respectability. Nonnie gets pregnant and Tracy pays his African American friend and servant Henry to marry her. Instead of assuming responsibility for his insensitive cowardice, he thinks of it as something inevitably bound to happen, as if he had started "on a road whose map had been drawn long ago, so long ago he could never remember" (206).

Tracy's mother, Alma Dean, is obsessed with rigid divisions and definitions: body/soul, black/white, feminine/masculine. She is the supreme representative of a sclerotic Victorian morality, the enforcer of the moral values of White Town, of the southern church's rigid splitting of spirit and body. Cold and controlling, she enforces the white lack of sexuality whose counterbalance in this world without integration is the "Negro" sexuality that Tracy finds in Nonnie. Alma, whose name expresses her escape from physicality, is the stereotypical southern lady, the complicit victim of a system that values the fragility of the white woman and enforces the denial of emotion and sexuality. She is the married woman who considers sex a painful obligation, "that part of marriage [that] seemed to Alma a little unclean and definitely uncomfortable" (77). She uses the room of her virginal daughter Laura as a refuge where she occasionally sleeps "escaping [her husband's] masculinity" (67). One of the major symbols in the novel is the clay torso that Alma one day finds in Laura's room, "wrapped in a wet cloth". When she uncovers it, the figure "lay in her hand, urgent, damp like something in gestation. A lump of wet dirt" (67). No matter how long she looks at the clay figure, Alma cannot find any art in it: "If it had any beauty in it! But no, only nakedness". Alma cannot see "[w]hy should Laura want to make naked things?" It would be logical in a man, because "men seemed made that way. But your own daughter..." (68). Not an idealized classical statue, but a realistic version of a woman's body, the naked torso sexualizes Laura and represents a world of dirt and physicality that is far from the representation of the lady in Alma's world. Incapable of accepting that women have bodies and genitals, Alma dismisses the figure as "a lump of dirt" (67) and later throws it into the garbage can. She is as intent on compartmentalizing race as she is on compartmentalizing sexuality, and she rejects the flesh as vehemently as she rejects blackness, and tries with the same intensity to keep both at a distance. White women are ladies imprisoned by their bodilessness; black women are excluded from ladyhood but not subject to the suppression of the physical.

Alma warns her daughter Laura against spending too much time with her friend Jane Hardy, an older single woman, one of those “who aren’t safe for young girls to be with”, the reason being that “[t]here’re women who are – unnatural. They are like vultures” who do “terrible things to young girls”. Alma does not believe “a woman is the right kind of woman who talks about the naked body as Jane does” (243). Setting up walls in the form of sexual taboos is another form of segregation that destroys human relationships. Laura will have to repress her attraction for Jane all her life, in the same way that her brother Tracy will have to deny his feelings for the black girl he loves. As Loveland (1986: 184) notes, “[t]he novel suggests that sexual taboos have as crippling an effect on the people of Maxwell as the racial taboos separating blacks and whites”. Alma fits the type of southern woman that Lillian Smith describes as a castrater. She is manipulative to the point of taking over the family drugstore his father had given control of to Tracy, and she has always “planned Laura’s life” (Smith 1992: 71). She is psychologically and sexually crippled and turns hateful and destructive, one of those women who, having found their own dreams destroyed, “destroyed in cruelty their children’s dreams and their men’s aspirations” (Smith 1994: 150). These are the women who make their home into a “police-state” in which these “vigilant guardians of [...] southern tradition” enforce obedience to all religious, sexual and racial rules. These women are themselves victims of a culture which “had ripped off their inherent dignity and made them silly statues and psychic children, stunting their capacity for understanding and enjoyment of husbands and family” (151). These are the women who “did a thorough job of closing the path to mature genitality for many of their sons and daughters” (153). No wonder it is Alma who sends the preacher to inform her son of the boundaries his culture forbids him to transgress, to transmit the official line of thinking about black women who cannot possibly be decent and respectable and to expand on the virtues of divinely ordained segregation: “God made the white race for a great purpose” (Smith 1992: 88). Once his transgressive tendencies have been neutralized, Tracy knows that he is betraying the truth, but he is too passive to resist his domineering mother.⁵ Having decided to join the church and to marry Dottie, the rich, virginal white girl next door, he has a clear understanding of the racial and sexual divisions that haunt southern society and split the psyches of its individuals:

5. In a letter of uncertain recipient and date, the author wrote, “I did not consciously tell myself that Alma (the mother) was Southern Tradition until I had half written the book”. In this same letter, Smith added that “I did not tell myself that Tracy, the young southern man, was a symbol of the South’s moral weakness, its ambivalences and ambiguities, its fixation on the past (Alma), until I hit a certain chapter and then it blazed out at me” (Smith in Cliff 1978: 217).

Back of him White Town. Back of him white women. All the white women in the world. Yeah ... they tie their love around you like a little thin wire and pull, keep pulling until they cut you in two. That's what they do. Back there, they're asleep now, stretched out on their beds asleep, ruling the town. White goddesses. Pure as snow – dole out a little of their body to you – just a little – see – it's poison – you can't take but a few drops – don't be greedy – do as I tell you – do as I tell you now – be good boy – (194-195)

The few drops of sex that white husbands get from their pure wives are the equivalent of the tiny rations of love that Tracy gets from his cold mother. As Diane Roberts (1994: 188) notes, both the white woman and the white mother “make desire and gratification contingent on obedience to the Southern social order which constructs white women as goddesses, untouchable yet powerful”. It is the same discourse that constructs black women as dirty and easily available to white males, that makes chastity – or its absence – the only criterion to define female value.

Killers of the Dream was the most daring and controversial of Smith's books, one of the harshest portraits of the South by a notable white southerner. In 1949, when it was originally published, very few whites considered segregation as the South's number one problem. One of her aims was to find an answer to an old question, “Why has the white man dreamed so fabulous a dream of freedom and human dignity and again and again tried to kill his own dream?” (Smith in Loveland 1986: 98), in order to expose the moral mistake of assessing individuals by the arbitrary category of race, instead of the standard of individual freedom and merit on which America prided itself. In the South, the killers of the dream were not only the evils that Smith had been writing about since the 1930s: ignorance, poverty, political bargains between North and South, between the South's rich and poor whites, but also the timid and confused southern liberals who advised patience, and especially the “haunted childhood” of white southerners, the most prominent topic in the book.

Influenced by her reading of Freud, in *Killers of the Dream* Smith presents the South as a sick society, tormented by racial segregation, haunted by sin and guilt. Drawing partly on her own experience, she describes what it was like to grow up in the South, to live in a segregated culture. The South is like a house haunted by the ghosts produced by a culture of segregation, by a long history of oppression and repression that fractured individuals of both races and killed so many things in them. The author set herself the task of bringing to the surface the darkest and most fearful side of southern childhood in order to make possible a future of light and freedom. She shows how the white home functions as the site where

socialization takes place, where white children learn about racial difference and are steeped in the culture of segregation:

Neither the Negro nor sex was often discussed at length in our home. We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters but we learned our lessons well. We learned the intricate system of taboos, of renunciations and compensations, of manners, voice modulations, words, feelings, along with our prayers, our toilet habits, and our games. I do not remember how or when, but by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it, that sex has its place and must be kept in it, that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if I ever treated a Negro as my social equal and as terrifying a disaster would befall my family if ever I were to have a baby outside of marriage. [...]

From the day I was born, I began to learn my lessons. I was put in a rigid frame too intricate, too twisting to describe here so briefly, but I learned to conform to its slide-rule measurements. I learned it is possible to be a Christian and a white southerner simultaneously; to be a gentlewoman and an arrogant callous creature in the same moment; to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable in doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word *democracy* was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality. (Smith 1994: 27-29)

The mind of the white southerner bred by this culture is like a house divided producing schizophrenia in those individuals who establish their gender and racial identities in opposition to the darkness which is both inside and outside the home. Smith opposed the spiritual imprisonment of the white southerner by urging the opening of the doors of the haunted house of the South in order to avoid a crippling compartmentalization and to recover forbidden energies. Only thus could the self be liberated from ideological imprisonment in the house of southern tradition, and the heart and the mind and the conscience reconnected with each other and with reality.

The “haunted childhood” of white southerners includes three traumatic relationships, three never openly acknowledged “ghost relationships” that, like the childhood lessons quoted above, had to be brought to the level of consciousness before they could be laid to rest. The three “ghost stories” are: the relationships between white men and black women, the suppressed relationship between white fathers and their African American children, and the devalued

relationship between white children and their African American mammies. The first of the three is directly related to the white women's conviction "that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure" and to their listening to their men's "tribute to Sacred Womanhood". The trouble with these women is that "they stayed on lonely pedestals and rigidly played 'statue' while their men went about more important affairs elsewhere" (141). "Elsewhere" is the coloured section of town and the "more important affairs" are the sexual satisfactions that the men get from black women once they have shut sexual fulfilment off from their white women. Smith denounces the white woman's complicity in a perverse system that separates them from their bodies as White Town is separated from Colored Town: "The more trails the white man made to back-yard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal when he returned to the big house. The higher the pedestal, the less he enjoyed her whom he had put there, for statues after all are only nice things to look at" (121). This culture that segregates races and bodies produces cold disembodied women, like Alma and Dottie in *Strange Fruit*, unknowing victims of "a patriarchal-puritanic system which psychically castrated its women" (118).

One of Smith's most original and valuable contributions to the study of southern society was her insightful analysis of the connections between racial and sexual oppression, her coupling of a fierce denunciation of the culture of segregation with the rejection of the role of the southern lady. A famous passage in *Killers of the Dream* presents the connection between racial and sexual segregation, which to Smith are parallel emblems of the cultural schizophrenia of southern society. She establishes a metaphorical parallel between the "segregated" parts of the body and the segregated spaces of southern towns, and points to the interrelations of the legacy of racial segregation and that of Victorian sexual repression. To explore the black body entails as great a risk as exploring one's own:

By the time we were five years old we had learned, without hearing the words, that masturbation is wrong and segregation is right, and each had become a dread taboo that must never be broken, for we believed God [...] had made the rules concerning not only Him and our parents, but our bodies and Negroes. Therefore when we as small children crept over the race line and ate and played with Negroes or broke other segregation customs known to us, we felt the same dread fear of consequences, the same overwhelming guilt we felt when we crept over the sex line and played with our body. (83-84)

The God that sanctions segregation and instils the fear of dark people is the same one that instils the fear of the creative powers in our own bodies. Sexuality is dark and should be repressed with the same vehemence as blacks. Actually, at the core

of the doctrine inculcated into southern children is the principle that “[n]ot only Negroes but everything dark, dangerous, evil must be pushed to the rim of one’s life” (90). Thus the southerner is turned into a broken, diminished being by his own culture, which suppresses not only the humanity of blacks but also the creative and precious darkness within himself. For Smith, then, integration was more than a strategy to improve race relations; it was an effort to restore the wholeness of the individual and stop the compartmentalization of a culture characterized by its blocked doors preventing the free flow of precious energies. Smith insistently voiced her concern with the harm segregation does to white children, which is like a reflection of that done to black children, as if both were united by a sort of Siamese ligature and equally deprived of a healthy emotional growth in the culture of segregation. Firmly convinced of the interdependence of human beings, she could see no hope of a solution until whites acknowledged the blackness in themselves. The lessons to which the passage alludes are reinforced by the racialized marking of spaces, both physical and psychological, by the “[s]igns put over doors in the world outside and over minds” (90). Southern towns become stages for social representation in which the racial order is marked by geography, in a futile attempt to separate all life into whiteness and blackness. No other southern writer has been more accurate in the description of the body as site of political contention: as a child she was conveniently told that “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” (87). Even in the white body, some parts, especially the female genitals, are contaminated with blackness. Thus, in southern culture, bodies are rigidly regulated and defined, and even the apparently unified body is segregated from itself, in an effort to keep sexuality at a distance. Nothing could be more appropriate than the application of the language of segregation to the human body. Segregation is, after all, a social policy bent on excluding and controlling the black body. The segregation of parts of the body derives from the same mode of thinking that produces racial segregation – both are pernicious to human growth and produce fractured bodies and psyches.

Smith proved that race shapes white women’s lives and identities, too. The myth of the southern lady on her pedestal made the southern white woman so “pure” and so desexualized that the white man sought sexual satisfaction in the easily available black woman. His own wife could not give him what he had blocked in her. If the white lady has neither sexuality nor physicality, the black woman carries the burden of giving the white man the pleasure that he could not demand from his “pure” wife. Considered by the dominant ideology to be intimately related to the forces of darkness, and excluded from the definition of true

womanhood in a culture in which woman meant white, the black woman was thought to be guilty of victimizing the white man with her disorderly sexuality and thus endangering the conjugal sanctity of the white lady (Carby 1987: 27). The situation was most degrading for both the white and the black woman. The burden was obviously much heavier for black women, but Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers and others stressed also the psychological damage inflicted on the white woman by the white man's inflexible structures of control. In order to be loyal to their class, white women had to deny their feelings, to repress their sexuality and physicality. These pedestalled women were prisoners in homes in which "[s]ex was pushed out through the back door as a shameful thing never to be mentioned" with the same diligence that "[s]egregation was pushed out of sight also" (Smith 1994: 141).⁶

Carson McCullers left the South in search of more congenial environments for her ambivalent sexuality; Lillian Smith stayed and tried to persuade southern women to denounce segregation as morally untenable, to reject an ideology that insisted that segregation was maintained to preserve the sanctity of southern womanhood. These two women writers opposed a rigid dichotomy of masculinity/femininity as intently as they opposed the separation of whiteness and blackness. Both of them welcomed the advent of the Civil Rights movement, and can be counted among the perceptive whites who always understood the interconnections of blacks and whites in the South, and felt that, to know half of their own history, whites needed to know their black neighbors of hundreds of years. As Joel Williamson (1984: 522) observes, "[c]ulturally, black America is so much white; and white America, in its stubborn and residual racial egotism, resists the realization of how very deeply and irreversibly black it is, and has been".⁷ For white people "[t]o recognize and respect the blackness that is already within themselves would be to recognize and respect the blackness that is within the nation". That would put an end to a race problem which is nothing but a creation of people's minds. In our time we should continue to pay attention to the voices of writers like McCullers and Smith, to their conviction that American whites are also somehow black, to their reminders that the system of racial and sexual opposites that our Western civilization has been cultivating for centuries creates dangerous binaries of separation flowing menacingly from white/black and man/woman to rich/poor, good/evil, us/them.

6. In southern culture, sexuality has traditionally been represented as black. In Faulkner's (1964: 87) *The Sound and the Fury*, a disturbed Quentin Compson describes his sister Caddy's sexual activities as dark and "nigger": "Why won't you bring him to the house, Caddy? Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods".

7. Lillian Smith insistently argued that, when repressing blackness, whites were suppressing something in themselves. She (1994: 212) was firmly convinced that the cultural creations of blacks "met a deeper need than most realized, reuniting us with a part of ourselves so long hidden away in shame".

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