Lillian Smith, Racial Segregation, Civil Rights and American Democracy*

Constante González Groba
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Abstract

The writer Lillian Smith was the white southerner who fought most strongly against the dictatorship of southern tradition and the totalitarian ideology of segregation. She usually placed her arguments against segregation in a global context by showing that the U.S. would undermine itself in the eyes of the world if it continued to cling to democracy for whites only. She saw the Supreme Court *Brown* ruling of May 17, 1954, as the beginning of a new phase in race relations, but she was conscious that the court's decision had not changed people's hearts and minds in the way that her friend Martin Luther King's movement seemed to do. Acquainted with the ideas of Gandhi before King became leader, Smith agreed wholeheartedly with the practice of nonviolent active resistance and, like King, she believed that moderation would never solve the crisis. Convinced that segregation originated in the fear of something not fully understood, Lillian Smith used her rhetorical powers to refute the psychology of racism and allay the fears exploited by demagogues.

Keywords

Lillian Smith; segregation; racial relations; southern non-fiction; southern history; civil rights; American democracy

Virginia Foster Durr was an Alabama aristocrat who became very active in progressive circles and vigorously supported the fight against segregation in the American South. She said that in the South of her time, there were only "three ways for a well-brought-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, she could "step outside the magic circle, abandon privilege, and challenge this way of life."[1] Lillian Smith, a contemporary and an associate of Durr, chose the third of these and became one of the first white southerners of her generation to speak out against those aspects of southern society that brought shame to the American nation. Her reputation as the most outspoken white southern

* The research leading to the publication of this paper was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Project FFI2010-17061).

1. Studs Terkel, Foreword to *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, ed. Hollinger F. Barnard (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), xi. Virginia Durr's famous autobiographical work was originally titled *The Emancipation of Pure White Southern Womanhood.*

critic of segregation did not diminish during the civil rights confrontations of the 1950s and 1960s.

Lillian Smith was an ardent defender of the freedom to dissent as part of the American ethos, and she was the white southerner of her time who fought most strongly against the totalitarian ideology of segregation. She devoted her work (novels, essays, and editorials) to exploring the cultural, social, and psychological worlds engendered by the dictatorship of what she called "Southern Tradition," the uncontested lessons that she had learned during her childhood in a well-to-do white southern family in Jasper, Florida, where she was born in 1897. She won broad public recognition in the 1940s, when many readers encountered her writings for the first time, and those readers included some of the leaders of the civil rights movement. Her critical views of American racial practices contributed greatly to the ever-growing calls for civil and legal transformation of the racist order during the 1940s. Her writings and her numerous speeches became a vital resource in the task of ending segregation in twentieth-century America.

Famous for her strongly moralistic outlook, Lillian Smith conceived of literature not just as an aesthetic endeavor but also as a vehicle for her political agenda. She adamantly believed that literature had a crucial role to play in helping the South find a solution to its racial and economic problems, and she disagreed with the way most southern writers portrayed the South. In a very negative review published in the fall of 1936, she debunked Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* because of the author's "unsure psychological grasp of character and limited historical perspective."[2] She adamantly rejected "the interpretation, however unconscious, of Southern life seventy years ago in nostalgic terms of old Planter ideology."[3] In line with her preference for politically committed fiction at a time "when half the world is starving or killing or preparing to kill each other and many of the other half tangled up despairingly in their own emotional problems,"[4] Smith showed no patience with escapist fiction centered on southern mythology. Thus she concluded that Mitchell's bestseller was "a book which has no claim surely on literature but is rather a curious puffball compounded of printer's ink and bated breath, rolled in sugary sentimentality, stuck full of spicy Southern taboos, intended for and getting mass consumption."[5]

Smith criticized the southern Agrarians with even greater ferocity, charging them with propagating a view of the Old South which was as nostalgic and as escapist as that of Margaret Mitchell. She also strongly disagreed with their

2. Lillian Smith, "One More Sigh for the Good Old South," in *From the Mountain: An Anthology of the Magazine Successively Titled* Pseudopodia*, the* North Georgia Review*, and* South Today, ed. Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr. (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972), 28. A review of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, originally published in Smith's magazine *Pseudopodia* in the fall of 1936.
3. Smith, "One More Sigh," 29.
4. Smith, "One More Sigh," 29.
5. Smith, "One More Sigh," 30.

critical stance, the New Criticism, which placed the essential value of a literary work in the work itself rather than in any social or ethical purpose.[6] Smith argued that the writer has a dual role as an artist and as a human being, and must show concern and compassion for his or her people, that "a glance at the history of the European artist shows that the mainstream of art has always involved itself with the profound experiences of its age and man's commitment to them."[7] She was convinced that the Agrarians persuaded many of their bright young students "to refuse commitment to a future that was bound to be difficult," urging them instead "to busy themselves with literary dialectics, to support the 'New Criticism' instead of a new life."[8] In her view, the Agrarians were not only blind to racial oppression but also unable to account for the economic and social changes that had already taken place, and by ignoring the wounds and fractures of their region's present, as well as the spiritual corruption of its past, "they missed the major point in the Twentieth Century dialogue which has to do *not with systems* but with men's relationships."[9]

This concern with human relationships, an obsessive idea in her work, is at the base of Smith's description of herself as a humanist for whom the "human" is a fundamental moral category and the engine, as well as the aim, of social transformation. In a speech in 1965, when she was severely ill with cancer, she said that the most urgent and horrendous problems of the modern world (police brutality, the Ku Klux Klan killers, drugs, war, etc.) are "only aspects of one big thing: this is the vast, urgent hunger of men everywhere to become more human."[10] In her report of February 18, 1950, in reply to hundreds of letters about *Killers of the Dream* which she could not answer individually, she wrote that she wanted this autobiographical book to show that she conceived segregation not just as racial segregation but as a psychologically harming alienation from reality, and she related it to her ethical universalism: "I wanted, by laying bare my own childhood experiences, to help others understand this strange ceremonial we call 'segregation': to see it not as racial segregation but as a profound withdrawal from life, a denial of reality. I wanted to say aloud that the concept of segregation has no validity for our new world; that we can no longer lean on walls that do not exist. This is the age of whole men, living in a whole world. I wanted my book to give insight, to stir imaginations, so that we can accept ourselves and all the earth's people as human beings, and once accepting, can go on with the job of making our new world—a world of open spaces with no walls in minds or between nations to throw their

6. For Smith's quarrel with the Agrarians, see Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, revised edition (New York: Norton, 1961), 223–26.
7. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed., 226.
8. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed., 224.
9. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed., 225. Smith's italics.
10. Lillian Smith, "The Role of the Poet in a World of Demagogues," in *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, ed. Michelle Cliff (New York: Norton, 1978), 161. Acceptance speech for the first Queen Esther Scroll, awarded by the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress, in Washington, D.C., March 17, 1965.

shadows across our children's lives. That was my dream."[11] Smith could not conceive of a changed world without each individual changing himself, and for the change to come about it was essential to pull down the walls that make people's minds "into segregated compartments," so much so that they can "believe simultaneously in brotherhood and racial discrimination."[12] The "segregated," brainwashed mind is, after all, a product of a totalitarian system, be it "Southern Tradition," or Nazism, or communism.

As Morton Sosna notes, "An important influence upon Southern liberals was their experiences outside the South. Even when they returned home, they found that residence elsewhere had added new dimensions to their views about the South's racial situation."[13] In the case of Lillian Smith, the time that she spent in China, from 1923 to 1925, as a music teacher in a Methodist music school was crucial for her intellectual development, and her experiences abroad taught her to question things and to think critically, stimulated her dissenting habits of mind, and influenced her eventual decision to become a writer. Her stay in China gave a specific international dimension to her thinking about the modern world and provided new perspectives for her worldview. In her biography of Smith, Anne Loveland contends: "Her political consciousness was awakened for the first time as she observed the operation of European colonialism and the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and 1912 and as she heard and read about Mahatma Gandhi's fight for Indian independence."[14] In China Lillian Smith became aware of the worldwide reach of white supremacy and got to know the everyday workings of colonialism, as well as the inveterate tendency of Westerners to consider their culture superior to that of the Chinese. Shocked by the attitude of white foreigners, including missionaries, who built enclaves from which the Chinese were excluded, she drew the inevitable connection with segregation in her native South. Years later she wrote in an autobiographical sketch:

> Seeing it happen in China made me see how ugly the same thing is in Dixie. I can never forget my deep sense of shock when I saw Christian missionaries from the South (and North, and England) impose their ideas of "white prestige" on this people who were living on their own soil. Here we were, intruders, staying there only on sufferance, yet forever preening and priding ourselves on our white superiority and calling ourselves followers of Christ.[15]

---

11. Lillian Smith, "Report from Lillian Smith on *Killers of the Dream*," in *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*, ed. Margaret Rose Gladney (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 131–32.
12. Lillian Smith, "The Moral and Political Significance of the Students' Non-Violent Protests," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 95. Speech given at All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C., April 21, 1960.
13. Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 176.
14. Anne C. Loveland. *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 12.
15. Lillian Smith, "A Skeleton Chronology of the Big Experiences of My Life, 1922–1925," undated autobiographical sketch, Lillian Smith Papers, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.

What Smith experienced in China had a lasting impact on her psyche and in a talk at Emory University on April 27, 1961, she said: "I lived three years in Chekiang province and there I saw the same old segregation I thought I had left behind. I collided in China with white colonialism. I heard the same old story but now it had a new accent, a sharper rhythm, different imagery."[16]

Having become nationally famous with her bestselling novel *Strange Fruit* (1944), Lillian Smith wrote *Killers of the Dream* (1949, revised in 1961), a rethinking of the American South, whose racial attitudes she wanted to change. She applied her powers of analysis to the South as "a tortured fragment of Western Culture,"[17] as well as to the whole of the U.S., whose "moral impotence" had let the world down and failed to use its immense "potentials for world leadership."[18] She definitely wanted *Killers of the Dream* to transcend its regional reach and have an impact beyond the South. She framed all her arguments in human terms, which indicated her determination to connect her interpretations of racist beliefs and attitudes in the American South to a type of cultural commentary that transcended region and nation. In the opening part of her Foreword, she states that this autobiographical book covers "experiences which our health as human beings requires us to understand,"[19] and at its close she says that her return to the memories of her childhood is "an attempt to find the answer to that old question that gnaws on every mind: 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?"[20] Always mindful that racism dehumanizes its victims as much as its perpetrators, she wrote: "Not only do we need to think of the Negro as human; we need ourselves to become human."[21]

Lillian Smith was convinced that the huge advances in modern psychology, in which field she was widely read, could play a vital role in the transformation of cultures and societies. She always studied the workings of racism in terms of psychological illness and its consequent social harms, and thus she wrote: "Around this subject of race have gathered the southerner's deepest fears; only about God and sex do we feel as strongly. Religion . . . race . . . sex . . . . All that we feel deeply about these matters we began to feel as children."[22] She described racial segregation as "a strong wall behind which weak egos have hidden for a long time."[23] She considered southern culture schizophrenic,

16. Lillian Smith, "The Mob and the Ghost," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 134–35. A talk given to the Students Colloquium of Emory University, April 27, 1961.
17. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1949), 223.
18. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 255.
19. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 9.
20. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 11.
21. Lillian Smith, "Humans in Bondage," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 37. Originally published in the February, 15, 1944 issue of *Social Action*, published by the Council for Social Action of the Congregational Christian Churches, New York.
22. Smith, "Humans in Bondage," 36.
23. Lillian Smith, "Ten Years from Today," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 62. Commencement address at Kentucky State College, June 5, 1951.

described the schizophrenic as a person who "has completely lost his ability to love and to make human identifications," and added that "when we reserve this humanity of ours, this precious quality of love, of tenderness, and of imaginative identification, for only people of our skin color (or of our own family, our own class, or friends) we have split our lives in a way shockingly akin to those sick people whom we call schizophrenics."[24]

In "Shooting an Elephant," the essay in which George Orwell describes his grasping "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East," he asserts that "when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys."[25] Lillian Smith insistently described segregation as "spiritual lynching" and maintained that "the lynched and the lynchers are our own people, our own selves."[26] A seminal idea in her work is actually the Gandhian view that colonial situations equally diminish and split the personalities of the victims and the victimizers. Thus she says that white southerners need to assess the damage that racial prejudice has done to their own personalities and culture, "for it is more than poor wages, wasted soil, poverty, race riots; it is more than the damage done to Negroes themselves; it comes close home to each one of us white people."[27] She showed her white southern contemporaries the paradox that segregation actually made them slaves, in that they gave up "the freedom to do right," "the freedom to obey the law," and "the freedom to speak out, to write, to teach what one believes is true and just."[28] She lamented the fact that the whites of the South think of themselves as free when the truth is that "we are chained to taboos, to superstitions; tied to a mythic past that never existed."[29] Smith's emphasis on human dignity as the main tool to change the culture of segregation is closely related to Gandhi's conception of the dialectical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. She was convinced that the human self is the only valid starting point for the transformation of society. In a letter of February 7, 1956, to Morris Rubin, editor of *The Progressive* from 1940 to 1973, she asserts that "[n]o one knew better than did Gandhi that to win a fight you have to win it first with yourself," and that "he knew freedom concerns all of a man and it concerns all men and one has to probe deep down and high up if one wants to achieve it."[30] The individual's need for wholeness was one of Smith's

24. Smith, "Humans in Bondage," 38.
25. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," 1936, in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 36.
26. Lillian Smith, Letter of June 12, 1944 to Guy B. Johnson, executive director of the SRC, in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 87.
27. Lillian Smith, "Putting Away Childish Things," in *From the Mountain*, 137. The article appeared in the Spring-Summer 1944 issue of *South Today*.
28. Lillian Smith, "The Right Way Is Not a Moderate Way," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 73. Speech sponsored by the Montgomery Improvement Association, read at the Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change, on the first anniversary of the bus boycott, December 5, 1956.
29. Smith, "The Moral and Political Significance," 95.
30. Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 188.

major concerns, directly related to her diagnosis of southern culture as a schizophrenic one. She believed that psychological liberation is indispensable for political freedom, and that vigorous self-criticism was a radical necessity for southern whites. In a letter of June 12, 1944, to Guy B. Johnson, executive director of the Southern Regional Council, Smith singled out the white man as "one of the world's most urgent problems today" and denounced segregation as "a way of life that is actually a form of cultural schizophrenia, bearing a curious resemblance to the schizophrenia of individual personality." She denounced the severe harm that this sinister practice did to every southern child, both black and white, marked by the same deprivation of healthy emotional growth in a culture of segregation: "No colored child in our South is being given today what his personality needs in order to grow and mature richly and fully. No white child, under the segregation pattern, can be free of arrogance and hardness of heart, and blindness to human need—and hence no white child can grow freely and creatively under the crippling frame of segregation."[31] She could hardly have been more precise in her description of the connection between racial segregation and psychological fracture, of the immense spiritual damage of an illusory racial identity propagated by ruthless demagogues. Having experienced in herself the closing of doors that alienates the self from reality, she strove to find ways to push them open. Such an opening could take place only after a process of painful self-scrutiny leading to the understanding of the internal segregation of the individual, which itself served to maintain the outward segregation of society. *Killers of the Dream* is, in essence, an invitation for the reader to accompany her in this opening of doors that will allow "glimpses of the world beyond, of that clear bright thing we call 'reality.'"[32]

A pervasive idea in Smith's work is actually the deformation effected by the culture of racial domination on every personality, either black or white. For her, integration was more than a strategy to improve race relations; it was the effort to restore the wholeness of the individual and stop the compartmentalization of a culture characterized by blocked doors that prevented the free flow of vital energies. Firmly convinced of the interdependence of human beings, she could see no hope of a solution until whites acknowledged the blackness in themselves. In her essay "Growing into Freedom" she wrote: "In trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from the good, the creative, the human in life. The warping distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child from birth also. . . . It would be difficult to decide which character is maimed the more—the white or the Negro—after living a life in the southern framework of segregation."[33] With her insistence that

31. Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 86, 87.

32. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 20.

33. The essay was published in *Common Ground* 4 (Autumn 1943). Quoted in Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 50.

segregation irreparably damages whites as well as blacks, Smith seems in some way to anticipate Toni Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* that America cannot do without its African presence, that Africanism is the vehicle through which Americans define themselves, that whiteness depends on blackness to define as well as to enhance itself. As Morrison maintains, "images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say."[34] Smith vehemently opposed the denial of blackness, which she saw as having emptied the very souls of whites. By denying an empowering self-division and projecting that otherness that lurked within onto a segregated blackness, whites excluded themselves from the very potent life forces they demonized; they segregated themselves by turning away from what they knew to be right and by allowing fear to keep richness and knowledge away from their lives.

Lillian Smith always conceived of the battle being fought in the South as a battle for civilization, and she stressed the parallels between racial segregation and colonialism, two cancers that blighted the world. She always explored the social evils and the psychological conflicts derived from racialism in America in terms of their connections to other countries and cultures. She was one of the first to see the transnational dimensions of the cultural and racial practices of her region, and one of the first to characterize the white dominance of the South as a colonial relationship. The failure of most southerners to make a decision and forget "the old dead causes" is comparable to "the unreasonable way in which the European powers have clung to colonialism even though they know it is a corpse."[35] If during Reconstruction some white southerners complained about the South becoming the "Ireland" to the "England" of the North, during the segregation period African American southerners described their situation as that of the non-white subject under the colonial control of white southerners. The black "citizens" of the Reconstruction became "subjects" in the reactionary Jim Crow period, when the South became a regional colonial space with a social order which erected rigid barriers between white citizens and non-white subjects. As so many black leaders stressed, it was much more than just living in segregated spaces or being excluded from the vote—it was a question of human development, of who gets the political, social and economic resources to live and to prosper in a modern society and who does not.

The fight against segregation, an evil based on abstraction and fragmentation, was a fight for humanity. Smith was a firm supporter of the civil rights movement (she actually preferred the term "human rights"), which

34. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 59. Morrison's italics.

35. Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed., 233.

was fueled by a courage and persistence that moderate southern liberals lacked. In fact, the movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s followed a course and adopted strategies with which Lillian Smith could not have agreed more. She enthusiastically saluted the movement's emphasis on love and non-violent resistance. Her own work influenced the movement, and the success of the movement in turn helped to create a new audience for Smith's work in the 1960s. The four African American freshmen who, on February 1, 1960, staged the historic sit-in at the counter of a Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, told reporters that they were prompted by the ideas of Lillian Smith, Mahatma Gandhi and Gunnar Myrdal.[36]

Smith incorporated Gandhi's ideas into her public activity and into her writings and speeches. When Gandhi's *My Appeal to the British* was published in 1942, Lillian Smith commented on the book in her column in *South Today.* Years before the appearance of Martin Luther King, Jr., as the movement's leader, she wrote that Gandhi's analysis presented the case for nonviolent resistance "as the only means to be used when one works for good ends."[37] The political pronouncements of Lillian Smith in the late 1930s and early 1940s were as courageous as those of Gandhi, and like Gandhi she was scorned by many racists and also by some self-proclaimed southern liberals because her voice deviated so greatly from the dominant social discourse of the American South and of American culture at large. On December 5, 1956, the first anniversary of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott (the first pivotal event in the movement that made King a public figure and that proved the effectiveness of mass collective action), a speech by Lillian Smith was read to civil rights workers and the organizers of the Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change (she was unable to deliver it herself because of illness). In the speech, "The Right Way Is Not a Moderate Way," about the problematic concept of moderation, Smith wrote that, in spite of being "the slogan of our times," "moderation never made a man or a nation great. Moderation never mastered ordeal or met a crisis successfully. Moderation never discovered anything; never invented anything; never dreamed a new dream."[38] For Smith non-violent action inspired by Christianity and the teachings of Gandhi was the road to truth and had the power to redeem and to transform society. She thus commended the "extremism" of the non-violent fighters in Montgomery: "You have chosen the way of love and truth, the way of non-violence and understanding, the way of patience with firmness, the way of dignity and

36. Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 197. The Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal was the author of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), a book in which he treated the race question as essentially a moral problem.

37. Lillian Smith, "Dope with Lime," *South Today* 7 (1942): 2. Quoted in Jay Garcia, "Race, Empire, and Humanism in the Work of Lillian Smith," *Radical History Review*, no. 101 (Spring 2008): 72. I am indebted to Garcia for most of the information about Gandhi's influence on Smith.

38. Smith, "The Right Way," 68

calm persistence."[39] She closed the speech by thanking them "for showing us all that there is always a creative, good, non-violent way to meet ordeal."[40] Smith's most explicit identification of non-violence with truth appears in one of the monologues about the civil rights movement which make up her book *Our Faces, Our Words*: "That is why it is so hard to practice nonviolence; because it is hard to reject all that is not true and real. We've got to think nonviolently if we want to think the truth. . . . Every time I stereotype anybody, or any group or any situation I am thinking violently."[41]

Lillian Smith never had patience with those who demanded slow integration and insisted on a process without interference from the North.[42] She said that the "so-called moderates are doing nothing" because "they are suffering from temporary moral and psychic paralysis."[43] She faced the same opposition from gradualist white liberals that her friend Martin Luther King, Jr., faced from accommodationist black leaders. In *Now Is the Time*, Smith virulently rejects the statement that "segregation cannot be done away with overnight" as "silly": "A house is not built overnight but it is built, often, in six months."[44] Both King and Smith rejected the gradualists' argument that the natural flow of time would solve all problems; they had a different sense of time, reflected in King's famous assertion in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail": "We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."[45] King and Smith counted themselves among the many who recognized the importance and broad implications of Gandhi's struggle to render British imperial rule in Asia illegitimate. They agreed on the need for political paths that would function as alternatives to the trap of moderation and both regarded Gandhi's tactics of non-violence and non-cooperation, combined with Christian-pacifist principles, as the antidote against all forms of political moderation that accommodated unjust social conditions. For both Smith and King the changing of hearts and minds, and

---

39. Smith, "The Right Way," 69.
40. Smith, "The Right Way," 75. The address influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., who paid close attention to Smith's arguments and kept a copy of the speech among his papers.
41. Lillian Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words* (New York: Norton, 1964), 85–87.
42. Faulkner wrote "A Letter to the North," published in *Life* magazine, in March 1956, saying that he opposed segregation but was against the violence that accompanied forced integration. He would "go on the record as opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate that evil overnight." *Life* did not accept Smith's reply to Faulkner's letter but *Time* accepted a piece in which she argued with a speech by the editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* that identified the NAACP with the segregationist US senator James Eastland, describing them both as "radical." See McKay Jenkins, *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 203, note 8.
43. Smith, "The Right Way," 72.
44. Lillian Smith, *Now Is the Time* (1955; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 91.
45. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation*, ed. Julie Buckner Armstrong and Amy Schmidt (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 187.

with it the breaking down of barriers and the building of healthy relationships between people, was the main objective of the civil rights movement.

During the 1930s and early 1940s southern racial practices and policies led to the South being associated with European fascism. A lot of discourse explicitly argued that racial oppression in the South implicated the whole nation, rendering inconsistent its claim to oppose fascist racism. Lillian Smith was obviously part of this and she did all she could to shock white southerners into the realization that at bottom they were no different from the Nazis: in both cases the mythic mind, when it is "uncontrolled by self-criticism, uncontrolled by ethical ideas, and instead urged on by primitive myths of blood and sex and race,"[46] produces only rigid barriers that deny many people their humanity.[47] And, as the racial agenda of the Nazis became more transparent, some southern white supremacists—including the Ku Klux Klan and the Mississippi senator Theodore Bilbo—expressed their support for the policies of Hitler, which confirmed the accusations of Melvin Tolson (a columnist for the *Washington Tribune*) that the U.S. harbored "anti-Negro fascists."[48]

When President Wilson mobilized the nation to defend "the rights of all people" in World War I, most blacks expected that, as the Civil War had ended slavery, the Great War would be a "second emancipation," as the generous contribution of blacks to the war would hopefully lead to their freedom.[49] But at the end of the war, black soldiers returned to the same racist America that they had left, and in 1919 black men, some still in uniform, were beaten and driven from their homes in many parts of the South.[50] World War II again raised expectations for African Americans. After Pearl Harbor, most blacks responded to the calls for unity and loyalty with a conditional patriotism. The famous Double V campaign of African American newspapers and civil rights organizations, which insisted that victory against racial segregation at home was essential for victory in the global war against

46. Lillian Smith, "No Easy Way—Now," in *The Winner Names the Age*, 82. Speech for the Arkansas Council on Human Welfare, at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, October 23, 1957.

47. On other occasions, Smith was even more daring and far less subtle, as when she established the parallel between the lynching of blacks and the Nazi camps (see *Killers of the Dream*, rev. ed., 68), or when she wrote in a letter of March 22, 1948, to *The New York Times*: "Totalitarianism is an old thing to us down home. We know what it feels like. The unquestioned authority of White Supremacy, the tight political set-up of one party, nourished on poverty and ignorance, solidified the South into a totalitarian regime under which we were living when communism was still Russian cellar talk and Hitler had not even been born" (in Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 120).

48. Melvin Tolson, "Hitler Blitzkrieg Strikes Near White House!," in *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the* Washington Tribune*, 1937–1944*, ed. Robert M. Farnsworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 123.

49. Leon F. Litwack, *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 41.

50. Litwack, *How Free Is Free?*, 46.

fascism, helped to mobilize blacks behind the war effort. The theme that persisted throughout the war was that blacks should demand their rights now when the government depended on their loyalty and services. On January 1942 the *Crisis* proclaimed: "We must say that the fight against Hitlerism begins in Washington, D.C., the capital of our nation, where black Americans have a status only slightly above that of Jews in Berlin."[51] According to Leon Litwack, "World War II was a critical episode in the African American odyssey, the first shot in what came to be called the Civil Rights Revolution."[52] This was because of the dramatizing of the disparity between American democratic rhetoric and its racial practices, and the heightening of black consciousness and black expectations. Their experiences in the World War II motivated blacks to take charge of their own lives and destinies. After the war, African Americans developed new strategies and ideologies to improve their social standing, feeling that they could not wait any longer.

Lillian Smith persistently exposed the hypocrisy of a culture that put so much energy into keeping blacks down while sending them to fight racial hatred in foreign countries. Her anger at American racism was so deep that she refused to support the country's involvement in World War II, a move that she later realized had been ill-advised.[53] Fascism was hateful, but she could not go along with the hypocrisy by supporting a war effort that was going to divert attention from racism at home. In order to prove its commitment to freedom and human dignity to the rest of the world, the United States had to eliminate segregation, which she described as "colonialism's twin brother."[54] At the same time, as she said in a letter to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt in April 1942, she admired the brave African Americans who wanted to serve, "so eager to prove to white America their willingness to die for a country which has given them only the scraps from the white folks' democracy." But she also detected the bitterness, the "quiet, strong resentment, running like a deep stream through their minds and hearts; something I think few white Americans are aware of, or want to face."[55] In a very sarcastic editorial published in the *North Georgia Review* in the spring of 1939, Smith uses a caricatured black voice to express her bitter condemnation of the fascism suffered by African Americans, which she paints as in some respects worse than that suffered by the Jews in Germany. She wrote that blacks could be sent abroad as shock troops, "since they have the longest and most persistent record of being splotches":

> They could go, calling out in their deep mellow voices: "Mister Lafayette, heah we come! Leastways, all of us cept the 5,000 or so who was lynched a while back. Mr. Lafayette, heah we is. They don't call us mister back home and they don't let us ride in their railroad

51. *Crisis* 49 (January 1942): 7. Quoted in Litwack, *How Free Is Free?*, 56.

52. Litwack, *How Free Is Free?*, 91.

53. Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 246.

54. Lillian Smith, foreword to the revised edition of *Killers of the Dream*, 15.

55. Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 58.

> cars or eat at their tables or sleep in their hotels or let us vote;—and they gives us what scraps are lef as to jobs and we knows to say 'thankee Boss.' And we take what's lef over in the way of schools and hospitals and houses and sewer systems and sech liddle things like that, and tips our hats. But we live in Gawd's country en that's a fact, en it's a fine place to live in ef yo knows yo place, and we knows our place, yeah Lawd! Now we'se come to lay down our lives for those Jews Mister Hitler's been pickin on. We hear tell he takes their property and their money and kicks them about and spits on 'em and burns their books. An' all that makes our democratic blood about boil over. Yas suh! For hit sho must be terrible to live in a country whar yo has yo money tuk (our ways a lot better cause we has no money to be tuk—just a little furnish which is et up and gone fo yo can say scat) and it sho must be a awful sight to have yo books burned—hit's a lot better never to learn how to read and write like us, we'se tellin you. And to be spit at in the face! That just shows the awful wickedness of that fascism business."[56]

The story of race in the United States in the twentieth century was both a national and an international one, especially during and after World War II. The collapse of the old empires made possible the emergence of new nations in which the majority of people were non-white. During the Cold War that followed, the Soviet Union tried to bring "Third World" nations under its wing by promoting communism as both anti-imperialistic and anti-racist, and thus the United States, which had always prided itself on being the champion of freedom and democracy, was faced with the inconsistency of trying to win the hearts and minds of non-white people in Third World nations while racism ran rampant at home. The Cold War made black protest a viable option once again and gave black leaders another chance to organize wide-scale protests to expose the contradiction between racism and democracy. And Lillian Smith took a most active part in the denunciation of her nation at a time when its racial problems undermined the pretensions of the United States to be the leader of the "Free World," and the persistence of racism was the Achilles heel in its competition with the Soviets for the allegiance of new nations that had recently shaken off the yoke of European colonial empires.

The civil rights movement was thus placed in a world perspective from its very beginning. The emergence of newly independent nations from European colonial rule in Asia and Africa provided a momentum of which African American leaders wanted to take advantage. The fortunes of these nations, like those of the civil rights movement, came to be increasingly entangled with the Cold War struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Each proclamation of independence in Africa intensified the racial pride of African Americans and spurred them on to intensify their fight for equality and justice. The 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott initiated a decade of black protest that changed everything and proved that an oppressed group can generate social change through the widespread use of social protest. This did not happen until southern black leaders realized that the black masses had the power to overthrow segregation. Aldon Morris correctly assesses the crucial importance of the black church: "The Black Church, which had a mass base and served as the main repository of Black culture,

56. Lillian Smith, "Mr. Lafayette, Heah We Is—," in *From the Mountain*, 332–33.

proved to be capable of generating, sustaining, and culturally energizing large volumes of protest. Its music and form of worship connected the masses to its protest tradition stemming back to the days of slavery."[57] Martin Luther King's requirement that the boycott and sit-in methods adopt non-violent direct action was crucial because it made it impossible for the white power structure to suppress the movement violently without serious consequences. The Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that declared school segregation unconstitutional was crucially important but it had not changed people's hearts and minds as King's movement promised to do. In a letter to King, dated March 10, 1956, Smith says: "It is the right way. Only through persuasion, love, goodwill, and firm nonviolent resistance can the change take place in our South."[58] She believes that the religiously inspired tactic is more apt to work in the South, as "in our South, the whites, too, share the profoundly religious symbols you are using and respond to them on a deep level of their hearts and minds."[59] Gandhi became a hero and a source of inspiration for King, and the tactics of non-violent direct action agreed with the ideological and organizational framework of the black church, which preached against violence and stressed the value of redemptive suffering. As one of the fictive monologists says in Smith's *Our Faces, Our Words*, "we did take time out to read Martin Luther King—all about redemption through suffering, 'absorbing' the cruelties of others . . . conciliation . . . compassion."[60] In line with her moralistic conception of the role of the artist, Lillian Smith persistently urged the southern church to follow authentic Christianity and take an active stance against segregation. In her Winter 1942–43 editorial of *South Today*, she urged Christian southerners to "protest segregation in their churches," and to "insist upon God's House being God's and not headquarters for white supremacy."[61]

At the end of her life, Lillian Smith resigned from CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) precisely because of the increasing abandonment of the non-violence policies. She actually described the new Black Power activists as the "new killers of the dream."[62] In the last monologue in *Our Faces, Our Words*, told in her own voice, she accused black nationalists of forgetting that "democracy is not a system, that it has no ideology; it is a way of life."[63] Firmly convinced that man will achieve humanity through nourishing relationships

57. Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 524.

58. Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 193.

59. Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 193.

60. Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words*, 29.

61. Lillian Smith, "Addressed to Intelligent White Southerners," in *From the Mountain*, 128.

62. Lillian Smith, telegram of July 5, 1966, to Floyd McKissick, national director of CORE, announcing her resignation from the Advisory Committee on learning that the national convention had voted to delete "the technique of nonviolence in direct action" as a requirement for affiliation. In Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 351.

63. Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words*, 118.

and not through ideologies, she goes as far as to identify this alienating ideology with another form of slavery: "Black Nationalism offers no follower his freedom; it offers him a flight from freedom, a new form of slavery—this time, slavery to hatred of whites and to black arrogance."[64] She further confirms the paradoxical convergence of extremisms when she identifies the practices and the motivations of black nationalists with those of the original instigators of segregation: "For Malcolm X and his hate-filled followers to talk now of a new kind of segregation reveals the cruel stupidity that hate imposes on minds; their minds are now functioning on the same splintered level as Klansmen and white racial fanatics."[65]

As Robert Brinkmeyer, Jr., says, "In the aftermath to World War II, Smith continued to use European parallels in her attacks on southern authoritarianism, but for the most part she now drew comparisons with the Soviet Union rather than with Nazi Germany."[66] A fierce anti-communist, Lillian Smith warned that racial segregation in the United States made communism more attractive than democracy to Asian and African countries. She wrote in *Now Is the Time* that "as long as we have legal segregation inside the United States we are a 'white democracy' to the Asians and the Africans,"[67] that many of the differences between East and West would be overcome through the ending of segregation: "Suspicion of the United States will diminish. Trust in American integrity will increase. Faith in our moral strength will return to us, too."[68] Smith had direct experience of the double-edged significance of the Cold War for the civil rights movement. She saluted the unanimous ruling of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* as the beginning of a new phase in race relations, although accepting that there was still a lot to do to solve the South's complex problems, and those of blacks in the whole nation: poverty and discrimination in the workplace and in housing. But she was also the object of attacks by segregationists who used the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War to discredit progressives like her. To the question of whether white liberals like her were following the communists because both opposed segregation, she answered: "It is a strange and sad thing to see many people who call themselves 'anti-Communists' credit communism with all the good, the creative and constructive beliefs and acts, which mankind has so laboriously achieved. Many of these good beliefs (and the acts that spring from them) are in every religion; some we have, in the past, believed to be Christianity's contribution to the human race."[69] At a time when many segregationists viewed progress in racial matters as

64. Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words*, 118.
65. Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words*, 121.
66. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930–1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 137.
67. Smith, *Now Is the Time*, 68.
68. Smith, *Now Is the Time*, 71.
69. Smith, *Now Is the Time*, 116–17.

proof that communism was succeeding in subverting American institutions, Lillian Smith turned the argument around to contend that ending segregation would end American collusion with colonialism and strengthen its standing in the eyes of the wider world, putting an end to the international allure of communism. For Smith, who hated red-baiters as much as communism itself, southern demagogues and communism were equally enemies of the individual. She had the foresight to show her fellow-southerners that in the American South people are as brainwashed by uncontested theories of race as the communists are by official propaganda based on fake mythologies: "We talk like fools, in Dixie and north of Dixie, too, about race and segregation; the Russians talk like fools about socialism and capitalistic imperialists, et cetera."[70] Segregation actually functioned as a "magnolia curtain" behind which white southerners protected themselves against the things they did not want to know.[71] This resistance to the truth is inseparable from Smith's persistent presentation of the segregated and fractured southern mind as a mirror for the segregated society in which white southerners lived their schizophrenic lives: "Segregation is an ancient, psychological mechanism used by men the world over, whenever they want to shut themselves away from problems which they fear and do not feel they have the strength to solve."[72]

Bibliography

Brinkmeyer, Robert H., Jr. *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930–1950.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009.

Garcia, Jay. "Race, Empire, and Humanism in the Work of Lillian Smith." *Radical History Review*, no. 101 (Spring 2008): 59–80.

Jenkins, McKay. *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation*, edited by Julie Buckner Armstrong and Amy Schmidt. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009. 180–93.

Litwack, Leon F. *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Loveland, Anne C. *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

Morris, Aldon D. "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 517–39.

70. Smith, "No Easy Way—Now," 85–86.

71. For one of the instances in which Smith used the expression "magnolia curtain," see "No Easy Way—Now," 86.

72. Letter to Guy B. Johnson, in Smith, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 86.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." 1936. In *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. 31–40.
Smith, Lillian. "Addressed to Intelligent White Southerners." In *From the Mountain: An Anthology of the Magazine Successively Titled* Pseudopodia*, the* North Georgia Review*, and* South Today, edited by Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972. 116–30.
Smith, Lillian. *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*. Edited by Margaret Rose Gladney. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
Smith, Lillian. "Humans in Bondage." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 32–55.
Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. New York: Norton, 1949.
Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. Revised edition. New York: Norton, 1961.
Smith, Lillian. "The Mob and the Ghost." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 131–45.
Smith, Lillian. "The Moral and Political Significance of the Students' Non-Violent Protests." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 91–99.
Smith, Lillian. "Mr. Lafayette, Heah We Is—." In *From the Mountain: An Anthology of the Magazine Successively Titled* Pseudopodia*, the* North Georgia Review*, and* South Today, edited by Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972. 331–33.
Smith, Lillian. "No Easy Way—Now." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 76–90.
Smith, Lillian. *Now Is the Time*. 1955. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.
Smith, Lillian. "One More Sigh for the Good Old South." In *From the Mountain: An Anthology of the Magazine Successively Titled* Pseudopodia*, the* North Georgia Review*, and* South Today, edited by Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972. 28–30.
Smith, Lillian. *Our Faces, Our Words*. New York: Norton, 1964.
Smith, Lillian. "Putting Away Childish Things." In *From the Mountain: An Anthology of the Magazine Successively Titled* Pseudopodia*, the* North Georgia Review*, and* South Today, edited by Helen White and Redding S. Sugg, Jr. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972. 131–37.

Smith, Lillian. "Report from Lillian Smith on *Killers of the Dream*." In *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*, edited by Margaret Rose Gladney. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. 128–32.
Smith, Lillian. "The Right Way Is Not a Moderate Way." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 67–75.
Smith, Lillian. "The Role of the Poet in a World of Demagogues." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 160–65.
Smith, Lillian. "A Skeleton Chronology of the Big Experiences of My Life, 1922–1925." Undated autobiographical sketch, Lillian Smith Papers, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.
Smith, Lillian. "Ten Years from Today." In *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, edited by Michelle Cliff. New York: Norton, 1978. 56–66.
Sosna, Morton. *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
Tolson, Melvin. "Hitler Blitzkrieg Strikes Near White House!" In *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the* Washington Tribune*, 1937–1944*, edited by Robert M. Farnsworth. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982. 122–24.
Terkel, Studs. Foreword to *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, edited by Hollinger F. Barnard. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985. xi–xiii.

Address

Constante González Groba
Department of English
Faculty of Philology
University of Santiago de Compostela
15782 Santiago
Spain

constante.gonzalez@usc.es

Moravian Journal of Literature and Film

Vol. 3 No. 1 Fall 2011

ISSN 1803-7720

The *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* is a Czech scholarly journal whose objective is to be a platform for an intersection of literary and film history, criticism, and theory. The journal examines literatures and films in any language, thus merging both regional and universal themes. The journal is published in English, is peer-reviewed, and has two issues a year.

Submissions

The *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* welcomes contributions in literary, film, and cultural studies exploring all aspects of the disciplines. All submissions will be peer-reviewed. Send essays electronically to moravianjournal@upol.cz, or, mail printed essays accompanied by a compact disc with the electronic version to Moravian Journal of Literature and Film, Department of English and American Studies, Philosophical Faculty, Palacký University, Olomouc, Křížkovského 10, 771 47 Olomouc, Czech Republic. Essays should conform to the humanities style (notes and bibliography), as defined in the current edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. All submissions are rigorously checked for plagiarism; we have a zero tolerance policy in this respect. The editors can assume no responsibility for loss of manuscripts. Manuscripts shall not be submitted simultaneously elsewhere.

Subscription

Individual issues of the *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* may be ordered in the publisher's e-shop at http://www.e-vup.upol.cz.

Publisher

Palacký University, Olomouc
Křížkovského 8
771 47 Olomouc
Czech Republic

This journal is published within the Research Plan "Plurality of Culture and Democracy" MSM6198959211, a grant project supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic.

moravianjournal@upol.cz
www.moravianjournal.upol.cz

ISSN 1803-7720
Reg. no. MK ČR E18802

Table of Contents

Articles

Book Reviews