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Dolly Parton and Southern Womanhood / Race, Respectability, and Sexuality in the Mid-Century South

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Dolly Parton and Southern Womanhood / The Mid-Century South

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Alabama, 2016

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary in
Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

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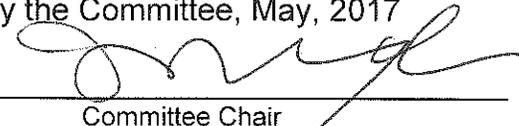
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Masters of Arts



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ABSTRACT

“There is No Such Thing as Natural Beauty”: Dolly Parton’s Cinematic Performances and Concepts of Southern Womanhood

Despite the influx of scholarship surrounding popular film and gender in recent years, little to no studies focus on one star’s impact on concepts of identity. The existing scholarship tends to investigate how types of films influence spectators’ understanding of the identities represented on screen. For instance, a study of female friendship films would argue that the spectators’ concepts of relationships and female to female interaction would be influenced. This paper aims to study one actress whose multiple representations of the same identity, both on and off screen, then influenced viewer’s perceptions of that identity’s power, sexuality, and place in society. The actress, Dolly Parton, starred in three major films throughout the 1980s that told the stories of southern women. The first of these movies, *9 to 5*, conveys a feminist message regarding women in the workplace and this paper argues that Dolly’s personal life and reputation influenced how southern women reacted to that message. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* and Parton’s comments in the press provide contradicting and racialized images of female sexuality which this paper analyses and investigates viewer reception. Finally, this paper discusses the questions raised about the value of female life, reproduction and the boundaries of the domestic sphere in *Steel Magnolias*.

“A Southerner Talking”: The Intersections of Race, Respectability, and Sexuality in the Mid-Century South as Revealed by the Content and Reception of Lillian Smith’s Novel *Strange Fruit*

Lillian Smith was a controversial author and social activist whose work and life have long been studied. However, the mountain of academic work done about Smith seems to consistently overlook several important factors about her first novel *Strange Fruit*. For instance, the bulk of the existing scholarship limits the thematic importance of the novel’s content and Smith’s life to her arguments against racism and segregation. The novel also conveys Mid-Century perceptions of female sexuality and homosexuality. Drawing on Siobhan Somerville’s theory of the parallel development of categories of difference, this paper analyzes the ways in which Smith used discussions of miscegenation to subliminally discuss same sex love. Furthermore, this paper explores the critical receptions of this novel to demonstrate the racialized views of respectability that existed at the time of its release in 1944.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who instilled this love of history in me with countless trips to museums, parks, and historic sites. Thank you for supporting my dreams and always reminding me that if I work hard I can accomplish almost anything. Dad, thank you for buying me the perfect reading chair that I have now spent countless hours in, I don't know if I could have survived the semester without it. Mom, thank you for being a sounding board for all my crazy ideas and for always being just a phone call away. I would also like to thank my Uncle Jim and Aunt Suzie for teaching me the value of education, self-care, and integrity. Your letters of advice and thoughtful conversations pushed me to be a better person.

Intellectual Biography

The two papers that form my portfolio examine two distinctly different subjects but share thematic discussions of gender, sexuality, and respectability. The thematic connections between my papers stem from my own interests in American understandings and perceptions of southern women during the twentieth century. In writing these papers, my own understanding of southern womanhood, writing, and the research process has been furthered.

The first paper in my portfolio was written for the research seminar “Popular Culture and Power” taught by Professor Kitamura. Entitled “‘There is No Such Thing as Natural Beauty’: Dolly Parton’s Cinematic Performances and Concepts of Southern Womanhood” this paper focuses on examining the impact of Dolly Parton’s movies, including the films’ production and the press surrounding their releases, on the conceptualization of southern womanhood. I did not begin this project with a clear argument in mind but was inspired by our seminar’s discussion of the impact of vehicles of popular culture (i.e. books, television, etc.) on cultural identity. I wanted to investigate how southern women understood themselves and where this understanding came from. After discussing this question with members of my family and my cohort, it became apparent that a common example used to explain southern womanhood was the film *Steel Magnolias* in which Dolly Parton plays an outspoken hairdresser. I decided to center my paper around Dolly Parton rather than films with similar storylines to *Steel Magnolias* because of my own familiarity with her and her reputation. I was born and raised in Dolly’s hometown of Sevierville, TN and often witnessed how her fans praised and imitated her. To

them, Dolly is the epitome of southern womanhood and in this paper I aimed to understand their perceived affinity to her. Specifically, I found it interesting that her fans celebrate her as the ideal southern woman even though the characters she portrays, and the persona she puts forth, vary in their depictions of southernness and propriety. I was also intrigued by how these depictions might influence non-southerners' understandings of southern women and later portrayals of them in popular media.

For this paper, I utilized a wealth of primary sources such as movie reviews printed in national periodicals, interviews with Dolly on press tours for each film, and tabloid gossip columns discussing the rumors about each film's cast. Conducting this research taught me how to assess the value and validity of primary sources as I had to narrow down my sources to the ones which provided the most accurate account of events and were most relevant to my argument. The press responses to Parton and her films were especially useful as they revealed how the popular culture of the 1980s defined southern women by either praising or criticizing the specific attributes of southern womanhood she portrayed.

I view Professor Kitamura's seminar as a valuable learning experience as it provided me with a greater understanding of what popular culture is and why it matters in a historical context. I value this paper for allowing me the chance to investigate and develop my own interests regarding popular culture. Additionally, this paper introduced me to the historiography of southern gender and film studies. To make this paper publishable, I intend to examine later films with southern female characters to determine if any of the aspects of southern identity portrayed

by Parton influenced later characterizations. I hope to successfully argue whether Parton's reinforcement of some traditional stereotypes and undermining of others altered the way the film industry approached southern womanhood or not. I would also like to find a primary account of one of the films' impact on a southern woman's understanding of herself (i.e. a journal entry or a letter to the editor) if such a source exists. Both actions would further support my argument that these films and their press coverage impacted ideas of southern womanhood.

The second paper "A Southerner Talking': The Intersections of Race, Respectability, and Sexuality in Southern Society as Revealed by the Content and Reception of Lillian Smith's Novel *Strange Fruit*" was written for Professor Sheriff's "19th and 20th century United States" research seminar. This paper examines the controversy surround Lillian Smith's 1944 novel *Strange Fruit* and how the surrounding debates reveal what was or was not acceptable in terms of sexuality and race. The subject of this paper was inspired by an independent study taken with Professor Meyer the semester before in which we explored the themes of gender and race in relation to the works and lives of southern female authors. It was during this course that I read Anne Loveland's biography of Smith, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, and felt that too much attention had been paid to Smith's racial activism while her criticisms of sexism and homophobia were hardly mentioned. This inspired me to begin this project with the intent of explaining why Lillian Smith matters in the context of feminist history. However, I soon realized this topic was too broad for the suggested length of the paper and began the process of narrowing it down.

In my extensive reading of previous scholarship on Smith, I noticed a common peculiarity in discussions of her first novel *Strange Fruit* as each author would mention the controversy surrounding its publication but provide limited information on the events that took place. For instance, Loveland mentions that bans against the novel were created in Boston and Detroit, and by the United States Postal Service. She fails to explain why these bans were enacted, who enacted them, how people responded to the bans, how/if the bans were enforced, or how they were eventually resolved. The reoccurring lack of explanation of these events inspired me to research the timeline of these bans, the surrounding press coverage, and the sources of the oppositions to the novel. This line of inquiry led me to discover the value of the entire *Strange Fruit* controversy in furthering my own understandings of twentieth century notions of censorship, free speech, the American literary tradition, segregation, civil rights activism, southern morality, female sexuality, and heteronormative gender roles. Despite the considerable applicability of a study of the novel's treatment to a wealth of historical considerations, I decided to emphasize its relevance to understandings of mid-century conceptions of race, respectability and sexuality. I focused my paper in this way because objections to the book's sexual language and interracial relationships form the basis of its controversy and were used to justify its banning.

My second paper was a learning experience because it taught me how to dig deeply into a topic and find an argument that was not initially apparent. In addition, it provided me with an opportunity to use types of sources I have not had the chance to use before like court transcripts, recommendations and reports

issued by a federal department, and a fiction novel. To make this paper publishable, I would like to find more discussions of the novel and its banning in the black press. These examples would serve my argument by providing examples of how African-Americans discussed and thought about miscegenation and explicit female sexuality thus allowing my paper to illustrate the politics of respectability on both sides of the color line.

In writing these two papers, I have developed my skills as a researcher and a writer which will serve me well in any career I decide to pursue or should I decide to continue to further my education. Additionally, I feel as though I better understand my own thematic interests and how those interests can be applied to the various fields of history.

“There is No Such Thing as Natural Beauty”:
Dolly Parton’s Cinematic Performances and Concepts of Southern Womanhood

“The female characters who illuminate the screens of our movie houses not only reflect and perpetuate the status and options of women today but also play an active part in creating new female role models. They show us what we are, what we were, what we could, should, or (do not) want to be.”

-- Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, & TV Heroines*

" The cinema insured that the South was a distinct section which drew unrelenting curiosity...Despite the growth of urban centers and heavy industry in the region, despite the disappearance of an overwhelming reliance on the land, despite the change in population patterns diluting the section's traditional peoples...the South has remained and will remain a section apart, established and sustained for better or for worse by a popular culture of film."

-- Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South*

The film industry’s fascination with the American South can be seen throughout the twentieth century as films inspired wistfulness and nostalgia for the region even as early as 1939 with *Gone with the Wind*. Popular film’s attraction to the South throughout the latter half of the twentieth century resulted in blockbuster movies with strong southern female leads like *9 to 5*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and *Steel Magnolias*. These films all tell the story of resilient southern ladies who overcome some type of adversity to achieve their goals. However, the strong female leads in all three are played exclusively by white women and if a woman of color ever appears on screen she is silent and in the distant background. These widely spread representations whitewashed

southern womanhood and attempted to mask their lack of diversity with seemingly progressive narratives of female triumph. The white women in these films either adhered to the strict conventions of southern domesticity or fervently challenged them, and in either case the character reflected the possibilities and pitfalls of normative white southern womanhood. While these female focused tales of victories were empowering to some white southern women, they presented a racialized version of the South that excluded any southern woman of color.

The white female leads in these films influenced contemporary viewers by displaying their ability to adhere to the gender norms of white southern domesticity in a modern world or their choice to challenge these gender norms in hopes of creating something better. Both courses of action resulted in definitions of what a southern woman *should* be. In the antebellum period, a white “southern lady” was expected to be her family’s pillar of virtue but remain submissive to her husband.¹ As she was morally strong but physically weak, she would need the protection of a man and thus had to be both beautiful and charming to catch a husband. It was her duty and “entire reason for being” to marry, produce children, and take care of the household.² This expectation of the southern lady was supported by evangelical sermons that quoted Saint Paul to mandate female submissiveness and relegate them to the domestic sphere.³

¹ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995) 4-21.

² Ibid.

³ The quote from St. Paul as seen in Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995) 7. “Women should ‘content themselves with their humble household duties’ “

Following the civil war massive casualties and violence of the civil war, many white women were left to take charge of their families' farms and businesses to stay out of poverty. As women began to increasingly enter gainful employment, their education opportunities also broadened as new skills and training were needed. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many white southern women had become educated and self-sufficient, and subsequently the need for the southern lady to marry lessened. White southern women encouraged by the possibility of freedom from the dominance of a husband chose to wait longer to marry a man they liked, divorce a man they didn't or not marry at all.⁴ However, if they did marry the pressure of childrearing was stronger than ever as the blame for a bad child was now placed on a woman neglecting her duties rather than inherent human nature. The knowledge of female sexuality began to be discussed and women became aware of their own right to sexual satisfaction and soon sought it out. The "new woman" that developed in the years following the war was still expected to be beautiful and charming but now she was also expected to be educated and strong enough to be her husband's equal but still possess some gentility.⁵ Before the war, the image southern lady was the uniform and complete description of everything a white southern woman should or should not be. From the end of the nineteenth century and in to the twentieth, southern womanhood had become more varied and complex as white southern women held different occupations, marital statuses, and more freedoms in the

⁴ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995) 216.

⁵ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995) 229.

public sphere. It is this new self-confident and independent white southern womanhood that *9 to 5*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and *Steel Magnolias* try to portray. To better understand how these representations of racialized southern womanhood affected understandings of southern womanhood, this paper focuses on the prominent southern female who acted in all three, Dolly Parton.⁶

The depictions of Parton's characters in the films *9 to 5*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and *Steel Magnolias* influenced late twentieth century conceptions of white southern womanhood and white southern women's understanding of themselves by providing visual examples of the various aspects of an idealized and racially constructed southern identity. The impact of these examples on notions of white southern womanhood can be seen in the press coverage surrounding each film, audience reactions to Parton's character, and discussions of her off-screen persona. Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer describe the impact of the films' effect on female identity:

"At their best films give birth to new visions of female strength and freedom. At their worst movies ridicule, denigrate, deny what real women have long achieved, and replace it with specters from the past...[Parton's] movies present an uneven mixture of both. They take away with one hand what they give with the other."⁷

⁶ The title of this paper is based off one of Dolly's most famous lines in *Steel Magnolias* and is intended to demonstrate one of the ways these films discussed southern womanhood.

⁷ Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, & TV Heroines*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 2.

The mainstream media's response to Parton's films reveals how popular culture of the 1980s helped define southern women, and how Parton influenced what popular culture valued in a southern woman. Film reviews and critical responses published affirmed what the film industry believed southern womanhood was or was not through criticisms or praises of Parton's portrayals. The success of the films also inspired the producers and screenwriters of later films to characterize southern women in a similar way. Thereby, perpetuating the aspects of white southern identity depicted by Parton and in some instances changing the way the film industry approached southern womanhood. Parton's representations of southern womanhood in film were broadly accepted in American society because of her notoriety and position as a role model for southern women. Her focus on Christianity, the family, whiteness, and rags to riches stories embodied what many considered to be markers of true southernness.

Southernness

The "traditional" definition of white southern womanhood has existed since at least the early nineteenth century and is often most connected to the imagery of the Old South. A southern woman was expected to be well-mannered, chaste, virtuous and proud of her southernness.⁸ On top of these qualifications, she was also expected to be highly feminine, beautiful, and white.⁹ Beginning in the

⁸ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*. (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2003).

⁹ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19-25.

twentieth century, southern women were also anticipated to exude a dignified strength of character and conviction.¹⁰ Dolly's emphasis on Christianity, remaining faithful in her marriage, lively spirit and outspoken love for her Tennessee home coupled with her stunning looks to provide an almost perfect embodiment of the new woman.¹¹

Parton's fit within popular definitions of southernness also stemmed from her childhood and personal life. Dolly Rebecca Parton was born in her family's one-room cabin in January 1946. She was the fourth of twelve children, and spent most of her childhood in a rural area of East Tennessee known as Locust Ridge.¹² Locust Ridge was in one of the state's most impoverished areas, Sevier county. Popular lore states that Dolly's father paid the doctor who delivered her with a sack of oatmeal because it was all he had.¹³ Yet despite her family's hardships, Dolly speaks of her upbringing fondly and expresses great love for her mountain home and its people. These sentiments also appear, along with details about her childhood, in her earlier music. In her song "Coat of Many Colors," for

¹⁰ Darlene O'Dell, "Forgotten Graves of Memory" in *Sites of Southern Memory*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

¹¹ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995) 212-229.

¹² Ian Brookes, "Dolly Parton," in *the New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18 Media*, edited by Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith, (The University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 330-332.

¹³ Parton has admitted that her family was often forced to barter due to their lack of cash. Asher Fogle, "Dolly Parton's Legendary Life in Pictures", *Good Housekeeping*, January 19, 2016.

instance, she describes a coat her mother made for her with of the neighbor's fabric scraps and how each piece was "stitched with love."¹⁴

Dolly expressed interest in music at the young age of six as she began to sing in the choir of the Church of God that her grandfather pastored. Throughout her youth, she traveled to radio stations across the South and performed on their shows. At the age of thirteen, she performed at the Grand Ole Opry along with Johnny Cash. When Parton graduated high school in 1964, she moved to Nashville and began to pursue a career in country music. Her first major success was landing a permanent role on Porter Wagner's variety show. At first, audiences were unhappy that Parton had replaced a beloved singer named Norma Jean. However, her bubbly personality and the well-timed release of a duet with Wagner in 1967 eventually won them over.¹⁵ Dolly's weekly appearances made her a household name while her good looks made her a fan favorite. She remained on the show for six more years, all the while releasing more duets and a few solo records until her song "Jolene" topped the country music charts and its success inspired her to pursue a solo career.¹⁶

For the next two decades, Dolly consistently remained on the Top 10 list of country music and several of her songs even topped the pop music charts. In

¹⁴ The song also has religious associations as the title come from the Bible story about Joseph's coat of many colors. Parton alludes to Dolly Parton, "Coat of Many Colors," *Coat of Many Colors*, 1971.

¹⁵ Parton was booed off the stage as the crowd shouted for Norma Jean on multiple occasions until Wagner decided to interfere. David Vinopal, "Dolly Parton: Biography", *All About Music*, 2015.

¹⁶ Parton's professional separation from Wagner was the inspiration for the song "I Will Always Love You." Ian Brooks, "Dolly Parton," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 18 Media (2011), 331.

the late 70s, several TV stations used Parton's popularity to increase their viewership by having her host multiple awards shows and country music specials. These commercial appearances, along with the successful crossover of her songs into the pop charts, created an even larger fan base for Parton. National and local media outlets praised Dolly for her unfiltered honesty, humor and physical appearance. In the South, her Appalachian roots, Christian values, and upbeat attitude had made her the "epitome of welcoming whiteness."¹⁷ Parton's background and rise to fame are relevant in a discussion of media and womanhood because her continued success was to a large degree propelled by the ways she fit into the gender norms of southern womanhood and then advertised those commonalities. She established an image of herself as the ideal white southern woman which explains why southern female audiences were so willing to buy into the concepts of womanhood her characters conveyed. Had her own life not been like the lives of the women she played, her depictions of southern womanhood would have come across as artificial and left little impact on the audience.

Dolly's influence continued to grow after the release of her films as newly revealed facets of her already complex personality attracted a diverse group of people. The "lite feminism" of *9 to 5* made her appealing to feminists and working women without offending women with more conservative values.¹⁸ The sexual

¹⁷ Holmlund, Chris. 2002. *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*. (New York: Routledge), 9.

¹⁸ Lite Feminism is concept coined by the author to describe the tendency for films to take gender specific emotional needs very seriously and ignore social, political, and economic conditions that are detrimental to real women. Susanne Kord and Elisabeth

nuances of *The Best Little Whorehouse* in Texas hinted at homosexuality and her pro-gay rights comments in interviews made her an icon in the queer community.¹⁹ Dolly's feminism and ties to homosexuality challenged her already established reputation as a conservative southern woman. However, she transcends these "mountains of contradictions" through carefully selected media coverage²⁰. For example, when interviewed by the *Knoxville News Sentinel* she kept the conversation centered around her Christian values and her family by discussing her daily prayers and her charity work.²¹ Through "sheer promotional genius", Dolly kept local coverage focused on her conservative ideals while national coverage addressed more controversial topics.²² This strategic manipulation of press coverage prevented any offenses to the diverse ideologies of her fans and demonstrated the complex relationship between the media and white southern womanhood.

9 to 5

Krimmer, *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, & TV Heroines*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 11.

¹⁹ In her autobiography, Parton states that "If I hadn't been born a woman, I would have been a drag queen. Dolly Parton, *My Life and Other Unfinished Business*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 309.; Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 163.

²⁰ The phrase "mountains of contradictions" is a reference to: Pamela Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 94 (1995): 109-134.; Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 162.

²¹ During the interview, she states that she says the Lord's Prayer before every meal, reads scripture daily, and her favorite film *Resurrection* is about a healer in the bible belt. See T. Morrow, "The Gospel Side of Dolly," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, April 16, 1999: E17.; Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 164.

²² Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 162.

Dolly Parton's first film *9 to 5* was released in December of 1980 and focused on the plight of three working women oppressed by their male boss. The film's topic is a satirical response to the political and social climate of the time. There was an increasing turn toward conservative politics bolstered by the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. The election heightened the focus on the Iranian hostage crisis, the failing economy and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The conservative platform openly opposed the ERA, after forty years of endorsing it, and used female speakers like Phyllis Schlafly to convince other women that the ERA would only make their lives more difficult.²³ Following a Supreme Court decision in June of 1980 that upheld federal funding for abortions, the Republican platform proposed a constitutional amendment to ban the procedure entirely. President Reagan was also strongly against abortion and stipulated that any Republican judge he appointed must also be opposed to it. During the campaign, Reagan's only mention of feminist concerns occurred during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. In that speech, he acknowledged that the country was divided on women's rights issues and promised that he would work with state and federal legislatures to end discrimination against women.²⁴ Despite this promise, many felt that Reagan's election was the end of the women's liberation movement. During his presidency, Reagan created millions of new jobs and women began to flood the workforce.

²³ Schlafly led the Stop-ERA movement and was one of Reagan's most visible supporters. Joanna, Rapf "Movies and the New Woman," In *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Stephen Prince, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 22-42.

²⁴ Ibid.

However, they still earned forty-one percent less than their male counterparts.²⁵ Hoping to reinvigorate the feminist movement in the face of conservative politics, Jane Fonda decided to make *9 to 5*. She stated in an interview that “Reagan stands for everything that we are opposed to” and that she hoped that peoples’ unhappiness with his election would motivate more people to participate in politics.²⁶

The storyline for the film was inspired by an association of female office workers started by one of Fonda’s friends in Boston, called ‘Nine to Five’. Some of the situations that the film characters contend with are based on the real experiences of the ‘Nine to Five’ women. To turn her idea into a reality, Fonda enlisted the help of screenwriter Patricia Resnick and director Collin Higgins. Fonda then produced the film through her company IPC films which she and her business partner Bruce Gilbert had formed after she decided she wanted to have control over her own work.²⁷ The lead characters were written with Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton in mind. Dolly agreed to do the film under the stipulation that she could write the theme song and Fonda agreed. During her down time on set, Dolly wrote ‘9 to 5’ after being inspired by the way her acrylic nails mimicked the sound of a typewriter.²⁸ The song went on to top both the country and pop charts, and eventually won Parton a Grammy for ‘Best Country Song’. Parton

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁶ Fonda specifically wanted to encourage participation in the Democratic Party. Jane Goodman, "Fonda: Seeking Acceptance," *The Canberra Times*, February 6, 1981.

²⁷ Named after the activist group where Fonda met Gilbert: the Indochina Peace organization. Jane Goodman, "Fonda: Seeking Acceptance." *The Canberra Times*, February 6, 1981.

²⁸ Kip Kirby, "A Potent Pen Scores for Parton." *Billboard Magazine*, February 27, 1982: 30-32.

had become a successful crossover artist, even topping charts in the UK, which once again increased the size of her fan base and range of her influence.

Along with its success, the theme song brought controversy when Parton was sued for copyright infringement. The suit was brought by Neil and Jan Goldberg, a husband-and-wife songwriting team, who claimed that Dolly plagiarized their song 'Money World,' which had been sent to Fonda.²⁹ Parton attempted to resolve the case with a cash settlement but they rejected her offer. Another suit was filed against Parton by Benny Martin, who claimed that Parton used music from his song 'Me and My Fiddle.' However, Martin accepted a settlement.³⁰ When the Goldberg case went to court, several expert witnesses testified that the song was not plagiarized as the two had very few notes in common. The lawsuit was, then, dismissed. Dolly's reputation was surprisingly unharmed by the lawsuits as most news outlets painted her as the victim of a scam.³¹ The press often argued that her genuine surprise that someone claimed she stole the song was a sign of innocence. Dolly even admitted in an interview that the songs did sound similar, but rather than taking this as an admission of guilt, most media reports praised her candor.³² Parton's wholesome image remained intact despite the scandal. Had she been guilty of plagiarizing the music, or even perceived to be guilty by the public, her credibility as a "good southern Christian girl" and thereby her influence with southern women would

²⁹ I found no instance in which Fonda addressed this fact. Variety, "Dolly Sings, Denies She Stole the Song from the Cleffers." *Variety Magazine*, December 18, 1985: 83-84.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

have been irreparably damaged. If she had lost the trust of southern women, they would not have been receptive to her character and the film's feminist message would have had little to no impact on them. Dolly's integrity was critical to her successful conveyance of the image of an ideal southern woman. A performer's integrity off-stage is inextricably intertwined with the integrity of their work, if their off-stage image is not in keeping with white southern values, on stage messages/work are not accepted.

The filming and production of *9 to 5* also generated media attention when rumors surfaced that the female leads were fighting on set. Tabloids often accused Fonda and Tomlin, who were friends prior to the film, of teaming up against Parton.³³ This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, this characterized Dolly was once again as being the victim in the eyes of the media. The image of Dolly as a charming, kindhearted southern gal was so prevalent in the minds of certain journalists, or their audiences, that they hesitated to criticize her for anything more substantial than her physical appearance. Secondly, catfights on the set of a movie that is about female bonding and empowerment imply that the friendship and teamwork of the main characters are unrealistic. If wealthy, successful, and empowered women like Fonda, Tomlin, and Parton cannot put aside their differences to work towards making a film that supports feminism, what chance did everyday women have of working together for any cause, let alone the feminist movement? The rumors could weaken the

³³ The interviewer commented that there were rumors that the set was like a "snake pit" and Parton responded by saying the tabloids make up these stories to conform to the sexiest idea of catty women. Karen Jaehene, *CEO and Cinderella: An Interview with Dolly Parton*, (New York, NY: Cinéaste, 1990), 4.

effectiveness of the movie as a political statement if they proved to be true. However, the co-stars quickly defended one another stating that they had “pajama parties” together on the weekends. Soon, the rumors decreased, although they did not stop entirely.³⁴ True or not, the trio felt the need to disseminate this notion of “pajama parties,” of grown women getting together to work out their differences with pillow fights and makeovers. This notion of female bonding as a means of resolving of conflict is non-threatening to men and thus perpetuated the sexist notion that girls/women communicate with emotions rather than logic. Additionally, this response reinforces the idea that women must be friends to successfully work together. However, had these women instead stated that they had a meeting and came to a business agreement as to how they would work together going forward, it would have been likely that the press would have portrayed the meeting as a cover-up and continued to report there was conflict between them. Tomlin, Fonda, and Parton had to appease the media and their fans to prevent a bad reputation from being attached to the film so that its feminist message would be believable but were forced into perpetuating anti-feminist tropes to do so. Additionally, this appeasement kept up the image of Dolly as a kind, sweet, southern girl instead of a bitchy career woman-- a villain in popular culture.³⁵

³⁴ Lilly Tomlin told interviewer that she, Fonda, and Parton had several pajama parties where they would rent a cabana at the Bel-Air hotel and “share their feelings”. Closer Staff, “9 to 5’ turns 35! - Go Behind the Scenes with Stars Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, and Dolly Parton!” *Closer Weekly*, February 17, 2016.

³⁵ “Hollywood producers influenced by the backlash trend in the media, created a series of movies that pitted the angry career woman against the domestic maternal “Good woman”.” Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 1991), 92.; Deborah Baker, “The Southern-Fried

9 to 5 earned \$3.9 million in its opening weekend alone and went on to be in the top twenty highest grossing comedy films of all time.³⁶ Due to its startling success, sociologist Sue Gambill decided to record the reactions of audience members during its original release to better understand the attraction to the film.³⁷ Gambill noticed a discrepancy in reactions to the various key moments in the film between men and women. Specifically, she observes that the women in the audience would start to laugh or applaud when one of the film's female leads would make a joke but then abruptly stop. Gambill argues that this was the result of women who came with male friends "swallowing their own laughter" to then mirror the reaction of the man they were with.³⁸ She believes these men were not laughing at the plethora of witty remarks in the film as they were uncomfortable watching a film that centered around female power and contained jokes made at the expense of the male gender. Gambill goes on to make a profound argument in further attributing their lack of response to society's unfamiliarity with "humor that affirms women instead of denigrates them."³⁹ This opinion is supported by her observation that the men in the audience laughed most during scenes in which Parton was sexually objectified such as the scene in which Mr. Hart discusses the size of her breasts to his colleague. This response

Chick Flick: Postfeminism Goes to the Movies." In *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 92-118.

³⁶ —. n.d. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Accessed Nov. 22, 2016.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bestlittlewhorehouseintexas.htm>.

³⁷ Sue Gambill, "9 to 5: Changing the Office." *Off Our Backs*, Feb 28, 1981: 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

further supports Gambill's assertion that popular culture, in the 1980s, was more comfortable with humor directed at women instead of produced by them.

Dolly Parton's success and untainted public image prior to the film are particularly significant when discussing this unfamiliarity with feminist humor, specifically in the South, as they helped to facilitate a change in society's preferred type of humor. As Dolly's music was constantly on the radio and her personal life was frequently discussed in tabloids, it is likely that most southern women who went to see *9 to 5* had some prior knowledge of Dolly Parton. This familiarity with Dolly influenced the way southern women engaged with the humor within the film. The feminist ideals embedded in Dolly's quips and jabs were much more palatable to southern women when presented by someone with whom they share the commonality of being a southern white female, and whose identity is known to them. Had it been an actress that was unfamiliar, of a different race, or regionally non-distinct delivering the same veiled feminist ideals, white southern women would not only feel emotionally withdrawn from her but also as if her comments were intended to convince them to give up their domestic roles and conservative values. The use of Dolly and comedy to discuss feminism and empowerment allowed southern women to become more comfortable with humor that affirmed them. The positive reactions to her feisty personality and the film's dry humor encouraged the film industry to stop depicting women as objects of comedy and allow them to be the comedians themselves.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "I think women's humor can be one of the most difficult areas because humor has for so long been created around the denigration of women, our bodies and spirits. Women's

Dolly's portrayal of Doralee changed popular media's understanding of southern womanhood by subverting several prevalent stereotypes. Firstly, her witty comments and ability to outsmart her boss Mr. Hart challenged the assumption that the southern woman was "an airhead with no political or economic ideas of her own."⁴¹ Secondly, unlike women in earlier films that only found disappointment in the office, Doralee found satisfaction in working to improve the office's environment and efficiency.⁴² Lastly, Hart was chained to his own house and reduced to menial tasks like watching soap operas while Doralee took charge of the office, reversing the stereotype of the southern housewife. However, the lack of racial diversity in the film suggests that this new "lite feminism" is only for white women thus disempowering a large percentage of the southern female population.

The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas

The next film in which Parton had a leading role was a musical comedy called *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Released in 1982, it tells the story of a madam, played by Parton, who runs an illegal brothel in Texas and has a love affair with the town sheriff, Burt Reynolds. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was adapted from a play of the same name and both productions are based on a

humor needs to be written by women, and Ms. Resnick has shown a great insight in affirming women and challenging society." Sue Gambill, 1981 "9 to 5: Changing the Office," *Off Our Backs*, February 28, 1981: 14.

⁴¹ A description of the archetypal southern belle. Langman, Larry, and David Ebner, *Hollywood's Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films*, 29.

⁴² Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 109.; See also 1980. *9 to 5*. Directed by Collin Higgins. Performed by Dolly Parton.

real-life brothel in La Grange, Texas known as the Chicken Ranch.⁴³ The film's controversial aspects -- prostitution and overt sexuality (sometimes interpreted as gay symbolism) -- reflected the pressing political issues of the 1980s Moral Panic. In 1982 the number of prostitution arrests, both male and female, in the United States increased by 13%.⁴⁴ The increased number of arrests and the threat to the prostitutes' livelihoods motivated them to form political organizations that advocated for their rights and campaigned to legalize prostitution like US PROStitutes Collective.⁴⁵ Additionally, in 1982 the Department of Defense issued a policy that regarded homosexuality as "incompatible" with military service and began to discharge men who identified themselves as gay. By the end of the 1980s, over 17,000 men were discharged.⁴⁶ In September of 1982, the CDC publicly announced that AIDS expanded beyond the gay community. This announcement turned the focus away from homosexuality and towards sexual promiscuity. The media especially targeted and blamed sex workers for the spread of the disease. At first, it seems odd that a film that seems to celebrate prostitution would come out at a time when conservative politicians are pushing for harsher laws regarding sex crimes. However, upon watching the film it

⁴³ Michael Blowen, "They Took the Texas out of 'Whorehouse'," *Boston Globe*, July 24, 1982.

⁴⁴ FBI Bureau of Justice Statistics, "1981-2012 Male and Female Prostitution and Disorderly Conduct Arrests by Age and Year in the U.S.", *Police, Prostitution, and Politics*.

⁴⁵ The US PROStitutes Collective is a multiracial network of women who work or have worked in different areas of the sex industry. Founded in 1982, US PROS campaigns for the decriminalization of prostitution and for protection and resources so that no woman, young person or man is forced into prostitution through poverty or violence. US PROS Collective, <https://uspros.net/about/>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

becomes clear that the whitewashed prostitutes of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* were hardly cause for concern.

The production of the film took over nearly two years as the director changed numerous times. Even worse, each time a new director took on the project Parton was asked to rewrite the songs she already wrote for the film. By the time director Collin Higgins, who had already worked with Parton in *9 to 5*, arrived to complete the film, Parton had written over twenty-nine songs.⁴⁷ The film encountered further difficulty when its production company, Universal Pictures, attempted to advertise the film prior to its release. Since, the word “whorehouse” was considered offensive and vulgar in more conservative regions of the country, mainly the South, so print ads were adjusted to say *The Best Little Cathouse in Texas*. But even that was banned in some areas.⁴⁸ Universal decided to use this controversy to their advantage by creating tongue in cheek radio ads that exclaimed: “Whorehouse- You can’t say that word on the air!”⁴⁹ These production difficulties are relevant to the film’s success because if Universal had not addressed the controversy surrounding the film’s name, the film would have only appealed to a much smaller audience.⁵⁰ If this had been the

⁴⁷ Parton continued composing songs through changes in producers and directors during the films 2-year production. Bob Thomas Associated Press, "Parton Says ' Whorehouse' May be Her Last Film." *Boston Globe*, December 30, 1981.

⁴⁸ "Creative Alliance Plugs "Whorehouse"," *Backstage*, July 9, 1982.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Several theatres throughout the South refused to play the film when first approached by Universal prior to the film’s debut. However, after a version of the film with the censored name was offered to them the theatres purchased the film and began to screen it.. "Creative Alliance Plugs "Whorehouse"," *Backstage*, July 9, 1982.

case, significantly fewer southern women would have seen the film and been influenced by Parton's character.

The film grossed earnings of over \$11 million in its opening weekend and bumped *ET The Extra Terrestrial* out of the number one spot in the box office rankings.⁵¹ Yet despite its financial success, the film received harsh negative reviews and was considered a flop. The *New York Times* claimed that "the film lacked even the inadvertently buoyant awfulness that makes some bad movies fun."⁵² However, most of the criticism was not directed at Parton even when discussing the failures of the character she played. For example, a common criticism that the film received was that Mona was too "clean" to be a madam.⁵³ She was never shown engaging in sexual acts, she continually emphasized the importance of good manners and propriety, and she had a sentimental, somewhat maternal, relationship with the prostitutes she oversees. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times gave the film two out of four stars, stating: "If they ever give Dolly her freedom and stop packaging her so antiseptically, she could be terrific. But Dolly and Burt and Whorehouse never get beyond the concept stage in this movie."⁵⁴ Dolly was cast as the victim of poor writing and the conservative film industry. She revealed to the press that "there was a lot of blood on this

⁵¹ —. n.d. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Accessed Nov. 22, 2016. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bestlittlewhorehouseintexas.htm>.

⁵² Janet Maslin, "'Whorehouse in Texas,' Reynolds-Parton Version," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1982.

⁵³ Michael Blowen, "They Took the Texas out of 'Whorehouse'," *Boston Globe*, July 24, 1982.

⁵⁴ Robert Egbert, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," *The Chicago Sun*, January 1, 1982.

project...it was the most painful thing I'd ever done."⁵⁵ This statement not only enforced her role as the sympathetic victim but also conveyed her emotional investment in the film. By portraying herself as a passionate artist, she played into the public's perception of the southern woman as emotional, rather than logical, being. Conversely, had she conveyed a more logical response like "I had some ideas that simply couldn't be incorporated into this project," it is possible that the press would have portrayed her as aloof and unwilling to compromise with others.

However, the press coverage of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* did not always depict her well. While her acting and musical talents were safe from disparagement, her weight and changing physique were not. The tabloids avidly chronicled her weight loss prior to the film and her weight gain after. They also claimed that she had had extensive plastic surgery as the dimples on her cheeks were no longer noticeable. The media frequently commented on the size of her breasts. One month the tabloids would say she had had a breast reduction, the next month she had had breast implants put in that were so large they were detrimental to her health.⁵⁶ The media's conflicting treatment of Dolly during this

⁵⁵ There was conflict between Parton and the producers/writers because she wanted to soften Mona's image and add love scenes between Mona and the sheriff even though the characters did have a relationship in the play. The film's screen writer Larry L. King then published a collection of essays blaming Parton for the film's failure called *The Whorehouse Papers*. Peter Travers, "Dolly Does Hollywood." *People Magazine*, August 2, 1982.

⁵⁶ A tabloid reported that Parton had gotten breast implants the size of basketballs and one of them was leaking and threatening her life. Barry Koltnow, "Nothing to Hide, Dolly Says Movie Role Mimics Real Life for Country Star," *Buffalo News*, April 8 1992: B7.; Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 161.

time reveals an important contradiction in the media's perception of southern womanhood. When the conversation centered around Parton's career or personality, the media focused on her as a businesswoman and praised for her charm and wit. For instance, the casting announcement for *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* described the female lead as "a super lady played by Parton with all her accustomed humor, warmth and charm."⁵⁷ This type of praise suggests that mainstream media perceived the southern woman to be strong, independent, intelligent and in possession of positive qualities that transcended earlier characterizations of them as weak, gossiping housewives. However, when the conversation turned towards Dolly's physical appearance, she was reduced to a sexual object and treated without the respect previously afforded. Thus, the media's paradoxical treatment of Parton reveals that the press's conceptualization of southern womanhood in the 1980s sharply separated a woman's identity from her physical body. The bodies of southern women were objects of public display to be inspected and judged without dignity, while their identities were viewed as complex, powerful and worthy of praise.

In response to the media's shaming of her body, Dolly began to answer interview questions about her weight in the hope of setting the record straight. She explained in an interview with *Vanity Fair* that her cycles of weight gain and weight loss were the result of personal heartbreak.⁵⁸ This answer "played into the

⁵⁷ Cart. "Film Reviews: The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas." *Variety*, July 21 1982.

⁵⁸ When asked about what had caused her weight gain, Parton responded: "Ain't it obvious? It was love." She does not elaborate on who was the subject of her love and eventual heartbreak, and it is unclear to whom she might be referring as she had been married to Carl Dean for 25 years at the time of this interview. As of 2017, Parton and

rise and fall narratives of love and loss, sin and redemption, popular with country audiences.”⁵⁹ Consequently, Dolly regained control over the conversations of her body by providing a story that was much more appealing to readers of the tabloid’s. Dolly’s self-empowerment challenged the media’s division of a southern woman’s body and self by connecting her physical appearance to her intimate emotions.

As previously mentioned, the film was heavily criticized for presenting a sanitized image of prostitution. One reviewer said that it was “a country brothel so clean that you can almost see Norman Rockwell painting the place.”⁶⁰ The prostitutes in the film appeared to be well fed and free of the many medical issues that often affect sex workers. No direct sexual action is seen during the film, and the most risqué scene is the one in which Parton is in skimpy lingerie. It also important to note that out of the fifteen prostitutes in the brothel only one is a woman of color. In 1985, 61% of the prostitutes arrested annually are Caucasian and 37% are African-American. This means that at least 5 of the prostitutes in the film should have been African-American.⁶¹ This skewed representation of average brothel demographics was criticized by film critics at the time and is now a major point of analysis in academic works studying depictions of prostitution in media. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* provides a highly unrealistic

Dean are still married with no plans to separate. Kevin Sessums, "Good Golly, Miss Dolly!" *Vanity Fair*, June 1991: 162.

⁵⁹ Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 162.

⁶⁰ Michael Blowen, "They Took the Texas out of 'Whorehouse'," *Boston Globe*, July 24 1982.

⁶¹ UCR Database. n.d. "Person Arrested, Table 43." *FBI: Uniform Crime Reporting*. Accessed December 2, 2016. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/1982/95sec4.pdf>.

depiction of a brothel that influences perceptions of southern womanhood. The absence of racial diversity signifies to members of the audience that the film industry's version of southern womanhood is associated with whiteness, while the experiences of southern women of color are deemed irrelevant. The film also influences the way southern women identify themselves by offering a whitewashed image of prostitution and the illusion that sexual promiscuity is glamorous and appealing.⁶² In addition, through Parton's character the film influences conceptions about how a southern woman achieves fulfillment. At the end of the film, Parton's character closes the brothel and marries the sheriff. Then he forgives her sinful past and provides her with a more respectable life. Female spectators could have been so moved by the sentiment of the emotional ending that they pictured that type of fulfillment for themselves and perpetuate the sexist idea that a woman cannot achieve fulfillment without a husband. Throughout the film, Mona was a strong, successful businesswoman who enjoyed her independence until the last minute, when she married the sheriff and became his first lady. A character who could have been a role model for southern women trying to run their own business or find their own independence was then reduced to a happy housewife.

Steel Magnolias

Dolly Parton's most well-known film *Steel Magnolias* premiered in 1989 and was an adaptation of Robert Harling's award-winning play of the same

⁶² The prostitutes in the film wore extravagant dresses and expensive looking jewelry. Cart. 1982. "Film Reviews: The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas." *Variety*, July 21

name.⁶³ The film chronicled the friendships of six women in a small southern town as they experienced various obstacles and triumphs. Dolly Parton's character, Truvy, is the sharp-tongued owner of a beauty salon where most of the film takes place. At the time of the film's release, Ronald Reagan had just left the presidency and George H.W. Bush entered office. The shift towards conservative politics under Reagan continued to cause social anxiety and conflict in what some refer to as "the war on women's rights."⁶⁴ On April 9, over three hundred thousand protestors marched on DC in support of legal abortion. Then in July, the Supreme Court reached a decision in the case of Webster v. Reproductive Health Services, which gave individual states the right to restrict abortion⁶⁵. Finally, on October 23rd President Bush vetoed a bill that would have provided funding for abortions for women who were victims of rape or incest.⁶⁶ He appointed Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court and stood by this nomination even after his former personal assistant Anita Hill came forward with sexual harassment claims.⁶⁷ After this, Bush lost the support of moderate, and some conservative, women.

⁶³ The play was based on Harling's experience with his sister's death due to Type 1 diabetes.

⁶⁴ A harsh response to the gains made in women's right in the 1960s and 1970s. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 1991).

⁶⁵ 2012. *George H. W. Bush on Women's Issues*. Feb 10.

<http://www.wewomen.com/key-debates/george-h-w-bush-womens-issues-s846705.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Anita Hill was a Yale educated attorney employed as Thomas' personal assistant from 1981-1983 while he worked at the Office of Civil Rights within the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. In 1991, Hill was called in to provide background information on Thomas, prior to the confirmation of his appointment, by the Senate Judiciary Committee after rumors of her harassment had come to light. According to Hill, Thomas repeatedly made vulgar advances towards her

Despite these struggles, feminism was on the decline because of the severe backlash it had received in the media and popular culture.⁶⁸ Judith Stacey explains that daughters of second-wave feminists held a strong desire “not to share in their mothers’ anger and not to see their lives in political terms.”⁶⁹ The deterioration of second-wave feminism resulted in the rise of the postfeminism, which believed that feminism had accomplished its main objectives and it was time for women to separate themselves from the movement.⁷⁰ The film industry, influenced by the backlash trend in the media, created films that offered nostalgic images of the domestic maternal woman, the antithesis to the feminist career woman, in the hopes of attracting a growing postfeminist audience.⁷¹ The most prominent type of film aimed at postfeminists was the “sentimental female friendship film.”⁷² Films in this category, also referred to as chick flicks, were

and often described his sexual fantasies to her in great detail. The FBI decided to proceed with an investigation into Hill’s claims of harassment but could not provide her with anonymity as Thomas had the legal right to confront his accuser. The subsequent testimonies were widely televised as Hill’s character was viciously attacked by the Senate Committee. At the time of this inquiry, Hill was employed as a tenured professor of contractual law at the University of Oklahoma and took leave during the investigation of her claims. Following the hearings conclusion and Thomas’ confirmation in October of 1991, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission saw a fifty percent rise in reports of sexual harassment as many women claimed the hearings helped them to understand what constituted as harassment and workplaces began to take reports of harassment more seriously. 2012. *George H. W. Bush on Women's Issues*. Feb 10.

<http://www.wewomen.com/key-debates/george-h-w-bush-womens-issues-s846705.html>.

⁶⁸ Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 92.

⁶⁹ Baker, Deborah. 2008. "The Southern-fried chick flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies." In *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 92-118. (New York, NY: Routledge), 94.

⁷⁰Postfeminists didn’t necessarily disagree with the principles behind second-wave feminism but rejected its victim mentality. Baker, Deborah, *The Southern-fried chick flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies*, 93.

⁷¹ Deborah Baker, “The Southern-fried chick flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies” (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 95.

⁷² Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Film*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-10.

often set in the South to inspire nostalgia for white southern women like Scarlett O'Hara⁷³ who was strong without being radical or aggressive.⁷⁴ The use of a setting in which normative female values were upheld allowed images of female empowerment to be invoked without creating the political problems and unease associated with feminism. The images of female bonding appealed to feminist mothers while the images of southern femininity like Scarlett O'Hara appealed to their postfeminist daughters thereby bridging the gap between the generations.

Steel Magnolias is one example of a southern chick flick due to its focus on intimate female friendships, southern femininity, and highly emotional content. However, the attempt to distance the film from feminism resulted in an antiquated depiction of southern womanhood.⁷⁵ The main conflict in the film is the potentially life-threatening pregnancy of Julia Robert's character Shelby. The severely diabetic Shelby was warned by several doctors, and her mother M'Lynn (played by Sally Fields), that a pregnancy could severely damage her health. Despite her mother's pleas, Shelby decided to go through with the pregnancy and survived delivery only to suffer a kidney failure and eventual death. Shelby's willingness to sacrifice her own life to have a child support the patriarchal belief that a southern woman's only source of fulfillment was motherhood. The supportive response of the other characters to Shelby's choice reinforces the societal validation of

⁷³ Scarlet has been credited as the prototype of a steel magnolia with her iron will encased in a delicate appearance. See also Darlene O'Dell, *Sites of Southern Memory*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001) *Forgotten Graves of Memory*.

⁷⁴ Deborah Baker, *The Southern-fried chick flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 94.

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that the female experiences within the film were filtered through the perceptions of a male writer, producer and director.

motherhood being worth any cost to the mother. For instance, Truvy encouraged M'Lynn to support Shelby's potentially lethal pregnancy even though M'Lynn suggested that modern medical advancements could safely terminate the pregnancy. Per feminist film studies scholar Karen Hollinger, the intense emotional effect created by the film's plot "encouraged spectatorial over identification with and over involvement in a scenario of female sacrifice."⁷⁶ The South's ideal woman, Dolly Parton, was shown valuing the opportunity to become a mother over good health and survival so female audience members who identified with or looked up to her were motivated to do so as well. The value placed on motherhood by the characters influenced how southern women viewed their role as mothers and the value assigned to their ability to reproduce. Thereby, causing their understanding of southern womanhood to return to the normative, domestic definition that feminists had worked so hard to remove.

The film further influenced understandings of southern womanhood by limiting the female characters to customarily female spaces and topics of conversation. The main characters of the film rarely left Truvy's beauty parlor except when they participated in domestic rituals such as weddings, church events and birthday parties. Per Karen Hollinger, this restriction to "women's territory" resulted in an isolated subculture based on customarily female interests:

⁷⁶ The feelings of loss that the film invokes in its audience can lead them to become overly attached to the characters. This attachment can cause them to disregard the character's victimization and incorporate the character's identity into their own. Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Film*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 81.

gossip, recipes, and clothes.⁷⁷ This subculture segregated the characters from the surrounding male-dominated society so the few men that are present in film are characterized as extraneous fools who either attempt to scare off birds with guns and fireworks or compulsively hunt to avoid social interaction, and are “just noisy filler in this outing that strictly belongs to its women.”⁷⁸

The separation of the sexes in *Steel Magnolias* is reminiscent of nineteenth-century female homosocial groups that shared the responsibilities of domestic work, passed along the knowledge necessary to fulfilling one’s female role, and served as a support system for women who were not emotionally satisfied in their relationships with men.⁷⁹ While these groups were subversive to male-dominated society in the nineteenth century, the contemporary model provided by the film adhered to the gender norms of patriarchal southern society. This antiquated depiction of a female subculture influenced southern womanhood by encouraging female viewers to find complete fulfillment in their societal roles as a wife and mother, and to support other women’s commitment to this role (a return to pre-feminist womanhood).⁸⁰ This influence can be seen in the film

⁷⁷ Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Film*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 77.

⁷⁸ While films that focus on women are important, films that separate women from men perpetuate the idea of separate spheres. Jay Carr, "Acting Makes 'Magnolias'," *Boston Globe*, November 17 1989: 85.

⁷⁹ Lisa Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in 'Steel Magnolias'," *Film/Literature Quarterly*, 1994, Oxford University Press.

⁸⁰ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 81.

reviews written by female journalists praising the film's image of a devoted mother and female friendship separated from the world of men.⁸¹

Lastly, the female cast in *Steel Magnolias* represents a great diversity in age and class but not race. The film has little racial diversity as the African-Americans visible are female workers cleaning M'Lynn's house in preparation for the wedding and serving food at the reception. Thus, relegating persons of color to their stereotypical and literal positions as the hired help.⁸² This erasure of inter-racial interactions appears to "express the white South's inability to conceptualize what racial contact might even look like."⁸³ Even though the film is technically set in the present, it seems to collapse into the past through its depiction of a segregated small southern town without any signs of racial unrest or protest, or prominent black characters. This whitewashed version of the South ignores the experiences of black women and continues to associate southern womanhood exclusively with whiteness.

Conclusion

⁸¹ This film review applauds the depictions of the character's personalities, the depth of the mother-daughter relationship between M'Lynn and Shelby, and the diversity of the cast. The author does not address the lack of racial diversity and claims the cast is representative of "women in their infinite variety". Carrie Rickey, "'Steel Magnolias': Bouquet of Hollywood's Best." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 17 1989: 3-4.

⁸² The positioning of persons of color as domestic workers demonstrates the influence of racism still present in the South despite the film's more modern setting. The segregation of the southern labor force persisted throughout the latter half of the twentieth century particularly in relation to domestic labor. According to the 1980 census report, the percentage of black "private household" workers in the southern labor force was 1.9 while the percentage of white "private household" workers was only 0.8 percent.

⁸³ Deborah Baker, "The Southern-fried chick flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies" (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 99.; See also Tara Mcpherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 166.

The American South has held the interest of popular film since the first part of the twentieth century. The film industry's enthrallment with the region peaked during the latter half of the century resulting in an influx of movies about the South and its people. Some of these films focused on the experiences of southern women, predominantly the experiences of southern white women. Through the female characters in these films, the South's female audience was exposed to powerful images of white southern womanhood. Some of these images reinforced normative understandings of what it meant to be a southern woman while, others challenged those beliefs by introducing new aspects of southern female identity. Each depiction of southern womanhood influenced the ways in which southern women defined themselves and were defined by popular media by providing an example of what was or was not acceptable for a southern woman.

The films *9 to 5*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and *Steel Magnolias* were each influential on concepts of racially constructed southern female identity. *9 to 5* influenced the way southern women viewed feminism and engaged with feminist humor by discussing these topics through a fellow southerner with whom they identified. Dolly's characterization of Doralee empowered southern womanhood through her subversion of normative stereotypes. However, the press coverage of the film and rumors of fights on set resulted in the lead actresses playing into certain aspects of normative womanhood to keep the tides in their favor. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* influenced the way southern women viewed sexual promiscuity and racial

diversity by providing a sanitized and whitewashed image of prostitution. Dolly's characterization of Mona initially empowered women by emphasizing her independence, however, by the end of the film Mona has given up her independence for a more conventional, domestic life with the male protagonist. The press attacked Dolly's body image and revealed mainstream media's fractured view of southern womanhood. *Steel Magnolias* influenced the way southern women valued motherhood by validating Shelby's choice to give her life up to have a child. Dolly's characterization of Truvy influenced the way southern women view themselves by telling them there is no such thing as natural beauty. These films somehow managed to assert feminist ideals while also capitulating to norms of conventional, but particularly racialized and southern, femininity. Thereby, presenting a deep and complex image of white southern womanhood that transcends previous simplistic depictions and is more akin to the complex and sometimes contradictory way southern women view themselves.

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“A Southerner Talking”:

The Intersections of Race, Respectability, and Sexuality in the Mid-Century South as Revealed by the Content and Reception of Lillian Smith’s
Novel *Strange Fruit*

“*Strange Fruit* is so wide in its human understanding that its Negro tragedy becomes the tragedy of anyone who lives in a world in which minorities suffer; when it ends in a lynching, we are as sorry and frightened for the lynchers as for the victim. Indeed, we are terrified, for ourselves, at the realization that this is what we have made of our human possibility”

-- Diana Trilling, “Fiction in Review,” *Nation*, March 18, 1944, 342.

“It was not merely a coincidence that the classification of bodies as either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” emerged while the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between “black” and “white” bodies...Emerging models of homo- and heterosexuality at the turn of the twentieth century were embedded within discourses of race and racialization, particularly bifurcated constructions of ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies.”

-- Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Colorline* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

In February of 1944, Reynal and Hitchcock Publishers released a novel by a lesser known author that was expected to only appeal to a small market and had a predicted profit that would barely cover the cost of its production.¹ The

¹ Lillian Smith to Joseph L. Morrison, June 19, 1965.; Lillian Smith to Arthur A. Cohen, January 11, 1965. Kathleen A. Miller, *Out of the Chrysalis: Lillian Smith and the Transformation of the South* (Atlanta: Emory University Press, 1984), 215-219.

other seven publishers to whom the author had presented the manuscript were unanimously of the opinion that, because of the novel's topic, it simply would not sell. Despite the grim economic outlook of this novel, the editors at Reynal and Hitchcock fervently supported its publication and advertised it as an "outstanding work of literature".² Their dedication was rewarded tenfold as the novel went on to garner massive media coverage, become the focus of a national debate, and outsell every other novel published that year. This sensational novel was *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith and it told the story of an interracial love affair in the Jim Crow South.

Early twentieth century understandings of racial difference in the United States heavily influenced the federal and state governments' policing of black and white bodies. A stronger conceptualization of the races as divergent categories led to an increase in the number of legal and social devices created to prevent people of different races from engaging in any form of activity with one another, especially that of a sexual nature. For instance, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* affirmed the federal government's right to determine an individual's racial identity and upheld the legality of segregation. The increased polarization of bodies based on race was echoed by a similar, simultaneous emergence of bifurcated classifications of sexual orientation. The materializations of these categories of bodily difference became normative in early and mid-twentieth century American culture and are subsequently highly visible in the film and literature of the time. These depictions of racial and sexual difference largely

² "'Strange Fruit' Banned by Boston Booksellers." *Publishers' Weekly*, March 25, 1944.

upheld the boundaries of the colorline and reinforced heteronormative sentiments. However, there were instances in which a body of work attempted to use representations of difference to challenge segregation and homophobia. Lillian Smith's 1944 novel *Strange Fruit* is a compelling example of this implicit resistance.

Almost immediately after the novel's publication, it began to generate attention and controversy over its provocative discussion of miscegenation, use of sexually explicit language, and harsh depiction of segregation. Reviewers for well-known literary magazines, national and local newspapers, and journals of opinion began to flood the press with their assessments of the novel and its handling of race and sex. The initial reviews of *Strange Fruit* praised Smith's frankness and literary skills while emphasizing the important role the novel played in addressing the "Negro problem"—a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the issue of determining what the place of African-Americans in society should be.³ Edward Weeks echoed most literary critics' initial opinions that *Strange Fruit* was destined to have an impact on racial equality when he called the novel "a new *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." ⁴

However, as the novel became more widely circulated reviews began to turn more critical as reviewers pointed out the flaws they perceived in Smith's characterizations of African-Americans, depiction of female sexuality, and use of vulgar language. For instance, a review in the Hapeville, Georgia *Statesman*

³ Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 69.

⁴ Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 98.

criticized her “obsessive concern with sex” and called the novel “an unreal love story between a white Georgia boy and a negro girl...in such glamour that makes courtships between negroes and white appear attractive.”⁵ Objections to the novel’s content quickly developed from personal opinions to legal opposition as the novel was banned for obscenity in Boston and Detroit in March of 1944 -- only a month after its release. Both bannings resulted in contentious court cases that questioned the boundaries of censorship and free speech, and engaged with public notions of decency and respectability. In May of 1944, *Strange Fruit* was banned from being mailed or advertised in the mail by the Department of the United States Postal Service until first lady Eleanor Roosevelt intervened to defend the novel.⁶

The examinations of Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* in literary reviews and legal deliberations reveal a great deal more than the novel’s road to success. Each discussion of the novel’s content and of Smith herself reveals what was considered acceptable and proper in the racially constructed communities of the South in 1944. For instance, the reviewers’ responses to the novel’s characterization of an African-American female character named Nonnie, whose relationship with a white man named Tracy is the focus of the book, reveal what African-American communities believed a black woman should or should not be. Therefore, the critical reception of *Strange Fruit* reveals the standards of respectability surrounding southern race and sexuality by providing examples of popular objections to Smith’s characterization and intersectional treatment of the

⁵ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 70-71.

⁶ Ibid.

topics. The content of the novel itself reveals mid-century conceptualizations of race and sexuality through Smith's parallel discussions of miscegenation, sexual behavior, and homosexuality.

Lillian Smith and her works have been the subject of scholarly interest in a variety of fields such as American literary studies, civil rights history, and LGBTIQ history as the novel's subject, Smith's writing style, and personal life remain relevant to considerations of social, political, and academic climates in the mid-century South. However, these previous works limit their analysis to some facet of the novel and/or Smith rather than engaging with the text, author, and publication as a whole. For instance, *Lillian Smith* by Louise Blackwell and Frances Clay (1971), one of the earliest and most frequently cited works on Smith, is primarily concerned with Smith's position as a Southern female author and focuses its analysis on the impact she had on literary traditions and the publishing industry.⁷ While their analysis is insightful and useful, the separation of Smith as an author from her other role as a social activist weakens the overall value of their work. This isolation provides a one-dimensional image of Smith that fails to reveal the impact her life and work had in other mid-century arenas like the civil rights movement and emerging understandings of homosexuality.

The tendency to box Smith and her novel in to a single category of analysis, and to ignore the intersections of race and sex present in both, can be seen in a multitude of other works of scholarly literature. For instance, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* by Anne Loveland emphasizes

⁷ Louise Blackwell and Frances Clay, *Lillian Smith* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1971).

Strange Fruit's call to end segregation and Smith's involvement with civil rights organizations like SNCC but downplays her criticisms of homophobia and sexism. Loveland further isolates Smith from the other facets of her life and work by stating in the epilogue that "her thinking was generally derivative...her literary effort unexceptional... her only significance lies in the role she played in the southern civil rights movement."⁸

On the other hand, literary scholar Gary Richard claims that Smith's primary importance lies in her depiction of homosexuality in his work *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction*.⁹ However, Richards chooses not to discuss the novel's interracial relationship and claims that any calls for desegregation seen in the novel are just a byproduct of its true message to end homophobia. Morton Sosna's *In Search of the Silent South* engages Smith's Christian upbringing and her novel's depiction of segregation's effect on Christianity but does not mention the lesbian relationship in the novel or Smith's own sexuality.¹⁰ These works serve as examples of the many ways in which the themes of race and sex in Smith's life and in *Strange Fruit* are segregated from one another. Also, each text attempts to place higher importance on one theme by devaluing the impact of the others which has resulted in highly conflicting understandings of what was or was not significant about Lillian Smith's first novel.

⁸ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 202.

⁹ Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction*, 1-7.

¹⁰ Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

Existing works of scholarship about *Strange Fruit* also discuss the controversy surrounding the novel and its subsequent bannings but often these discussions are brief and offer little insight into the origins of the bans. For instance, Loveland's biography of Smith mentions that bans against the novel were created in Boston and Detroit less than a month after the novel's release. Yet, Loveland neglects to explain why these bans were enacted, who enacted them, how people responded to the bans, how/if the bans were enforced, or how they were eventually resolved. The lack of detail surrounding the bans can be seen in most works that discuss the novel and in censorship studies like *Obscenity in the Mail* by James Paul and Murray Schwartz which only lists the cities and dates of the bans.¹¹ Unfortunately, to create an adequate analysis and discussion of the legal controversy surrounding *Strange Fruit* would require more research and time than what is within the scope of this project. Therefore, this paper is primarily concerned with the discussions of race, sexuality, and respectability present within the novel itself and public reactions after its release.

In summation, previous scholarship has successfully discussed the presence of these themes in the life of Lillian Smith and within her novel *Strange Fruit* but failed to discuss the ways in which these topics relate to one another. Furthermore, existing works fail to provide more than a few small details on the circumstances surrounding the novel's release and critical reception. This paper aims to fill this gap by using an intersectional approach to study the novel and the

¹¹ James C. N. Paul, and Murray L. Schwartz. *Federal Censorship: Obscenity in the Mail*. (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961.)

responses to it, and aims to provide a better understanding of the historical significance of both.

Lillian Smith and "The Negro Problem"

Although Lillian Smith was a middle-class white woman, she was no stranger to the realities of the segregated south as she was raised in the small town of Jasper, Florida and spent most of her adult life in Clayton, Georgia. Smith was descended from two slave owning families and her father owned several mills that employed a large black population throughout her childhood.¹² As a result almost every day Smith witnessed the wealth and power afforded to white families like her own, and the poverty which imprisoned black southerners like her father's poorly paid mill workers. Her awareness of the injustices of segregation can be traced back to a moment in early childhood in which her devoutly Methodist father decided it was his Christian duty to take an orphaned girl around Lillian's age until a permanent home could be found for her.¹³ The girl, whose name is believed to have been Julie, and Lillian became close friends up until it was discovered that Julie was of mixed race. Upon learning of her heritage, Lillian's parents immediately sent the girl away to the local orphanage and told Lillian that the separation was necessary because "you are white, and

¹² Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 3-9.

¹³ Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 174- 179.

she is colored". This forced departure of her childhood friend was an event that significantly shaped Smith's views on segregation.¹⁴

Smith graduated from high school in 1915 just as her family was preparing to move to Clayton and open a summer hotel in what used to be their vacation home on top of Old Screamer Mountain. Her father's business had suffered a sharp decline following the onset of World War I so he had decided to sell all their property holdings and permanently move the family into the mountain home. Smith had been accepted to Piedmont College in Demarest, Georgia but was only able to complete one year before she had to leave school and return home to help her father run the new family business in 1916. The hotel had been converted to a girls' summer camp called Laurel Falls Camp which would later become a major part of Lillian's life. After a few months at home, she decided to pursue her love of music and enroll in the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore to study piano. However, once again her education was cut short as she dropped out to volunteer in the student nursing corps in 1918. Smith returned home after the war and taught music in the Rabun County Schools near Clayton.¹⁵ She soon grew restless and attempted to return to the Peabody in 1919 but due to her limited financials she was not able to re-enroll. Inspired by the missionary work her eldest sister and brother-in-law had done in China prior to the war, Lillian decided to apply for a teaching position at an American school in Huchow, China. She spent the next three years living in China, and while there she became increasingly interested in social activism and Freudian psychology. More

¹⁴ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1949), 24-28.

¹⁵ Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 176- 179.

importantly, her awareness of racial injustice was furthered as she observed missionaries and other Westerners interacting with the Chinese people.¹⁶ Years later she recalled:

“I was young then. Young and inexperienced, and from a South where I had practiced segregation since I was born. But I saw what was happening. 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 impose their ideas of ‘white prestige’ on this people who were living on their own soil. Here were intruders, staying there only on sufferance, yet forever preening and priding ourselves on our white superiority and calling ourselves followers of Christ. It was the kind of thing that makes a young person sick. And I was young and honest, and I was sickened by what I saw.”¹⁷

By 1925, Lillian Smith was back in Georgia and running Laurel Falls Camp on her own with the help of a high school teacher named Paula Snelling. Snelling shared Smith’s interest in literature and psychoanalysis, and the two became incredibly close.¹⁸ Over the next several years, Laurel Falls flourished and

¹⁶ *North Georgia Review*, Winter 1937-38, 31- 32.

¹⁷ Lillian Smith, “He That is Without Sin,” *Chicago Defender*, August 20, 1949.

¹⁸ It was revealed after Smith’s death in 1966 that Paula Snelling and Lillian Smith had been in a romantic relationship that began when Snelling started at Laurel Falls in 1925. Many of the earlier scholarly works regarding Smith and her writings, for instance *Lillian Smith* by L. Blackwell and F. Clay, do not acknowledge this relationship or discuss how Smith’s own sexual identity may have influenced the ways in which her works dealt with and discussed homosexuality. The depth of their relationship and proof it was romantic in nature can be found in a published collection of Smith’s personal correspondence by Margaret Rose Gladney titled *How Am I to be Heard?*

earned a status as one of the best girls' camps in the South. Lillian began to write to escape the mundanity of the camp's off season and drafted three manuscripts between 1930 and 1935 that were tragically lost in a later house fire.¹⁹ By the end of 1935, Smith realized that she needed a means of expressing the many thoughts she had on racial issues, psychological development, and sexual behavior. With the aid and contributions of Paula Snelling, Smith began publishing a short journal dedicated to pressing topics in the South. The magazine was initially titled *Pseudopodia* but was changed to *North Georgia Review* soon after its founding, and by 1943 would be titled *South Today*.

Within this publication, Smith began to openly criticize segregation by employing methods of literary, cultural, and psychological analysis to reveal its debilitating effects on both black and whites. In one such article in 1938, she argued that racial conflicts would "fade away" if the books children read in school included stories about people of both races and if African history was taught alongside European and American history.²⁰ In addition to the anti-segregationist articles they published within the journal, Smith and Snelling hoped they could weaken the South's racial divide by hosting biracial events at the camp that encouraged conversation between political activists, artists, and intellectuals.²¹

¹⁹ Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 178. Lillian Smith later recorded the subject matter and working titles of the manuscripts that perished in the 1944 house fire. The first of the unpublished manuscripts focused on the connection between racism and sexual attitudes in China and was titled *And the Waters Flow On*. The second manuscript was about family structure and relationship dynamics in the South and was titled *Tom Harris and Family*. No description of the final manuscript exists other than a listing of the title which is *Every Branch in Me*.

²⁰ Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 180-182.

²¹ Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 121.

In response to Smith's direct attacks on segregation, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan pressured officials with the Georgia state government to harass Smith in the hopes of ending *South Today* and her public criticism. Officials attempted to revoke her permit with the Post Office to mail the journal and threatened her with an investigation into the management and finances of Laurel Falls Camp.²² Yet despite this conflict, Smith continued to publish the journal until the release of *Strange Fruit* in 1944.

The Origins of "Strange Fruit"

Following the death of her mother in 1938, Smith traveled to Brazil accompanied by Snelling and it was during this vacation that she would write most of what would become *Strange Fruit*. It is likely that during this trip, following her encounter with the Georgia legislature over the issue of desegregation, Smith was inspired to write about the horrors of segregation while witnessing the relaxed racial relations in Brazil. The Brazilian government and tolerant social conventions allowed mulattoes freedoms that southern blacks were not afforded back in the American South.²³ Lillian completed the novel, originally titled "Jordan Is So Chilly," by 1941 and began submitting it to publishers.

²² Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 180-182.

²³ *Ibid.*

The novel was rejected by somewhere between seven to ten publishers because of, according to Lillian, the novel's "complete frankness about the racial ambivalence of the South."²⁴ In 1943, an editor from Reynal and Hitchcock named Frank Taylor was told about the manuscript by Frank McCallister, the leader of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and a friend of Lillian's, and requested to see it.²⁵ Four days after receiving the manuscript, Reynal and Hitchcock decided to publish it and asked Smith to change the title to something catchier. She agreed and chose *Strange Fruit* – a phrase she had used in a 1941 article and a 1943 article in *South Today* to describe how man has become the twisted product of segregation.²⁶

“You know me... Every man from the womb knows me...I'm that which splits a mind from its reason, a soul from its conscience, a heart from its loving, a people from humanity. I'm the see of hate and fear and guilt. You are its strange fruit which I feed on.”²⁷

To combat the novel's predicted low profit, Reynal and Hitchcock marketed the novel in newspapers across the country. Their advertising campaign included

²⁴ Lillian Smith to Walter White, 1943. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 566.

²⁵ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 54-66.

²⁶ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 54-66. It is a common misconception that Smith took the title of her book from Billie Holiday's recording of a song titled *Strange Fruit*. Holiday herself credited the book's title to her song. Lillian Smith first used the term in 1941 supposedly a year prior to her hearing a recording of Holiday's song. Smith maintained the distinction between the two titles in a phone conversation with her editor at Reynal and Hitchcock (Frank Taylor) by pointing out the differences in meaning. The song refers to the victims of lynching as strange fruit whereas the book refers to the effect of segregation on southerners.

²⁷ Lillian Smith, "Two Men and a Bargain," *South Today*, Spring 1943.

the *Chicago Defender* and *The People's Voice*, two very prominent black newspapers, which suggests that Reynal and Hitchcock expected African-Americans to positively react to Smith's tale of interracial love and segregation.²⁸ However, the illustrated cover of the novel in the first, second, and third editions depicts the novel's main African-American character, Nonnie, with incredibly light skin and blue-gray eyes. The only hint of non-Caucasian ethnicity in the covers' illustrations of Nonnie is her dark hair and full lips.²⁹ This suggests that it was acceptable for the publishers to appeal to a black audience to turn a profit but when it came to the overall reputation of the book and the publishers themselves, they needed to appeal to a more suitable white audience. Additionally, the erasure of Nonnie's race from the novel's cover implies that for her to have been attractive to a white man than she must of in some way looked whiter and less black. Thus, her sexual appeal and sexuality are tied to her racial identity.

Shortly after the release of *Strange Fruit* on February 29, 1944, the novel became a best-seller and went through two more printings before the end of the year. In the novel's first year of publication alone, it sold over one million copies and was translated into at least fifteen languages.³⁰ The success of the novel was in part due to Smith's brilliant critique of segregation but largely the result of the mass amount of media coverage following its controversial topic and subsequent bans. The notions of race and sexuality presented in the novel's text

²⁸ "Buy Books about Colored People", *The People's Voice*, May – June 1944.; Ben Burns, "Books." *The Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1944.

²⁹ Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock Publishers, 1944).

³⁰ Miller, *Out of the Chrysalis: Lillian Smith and the Transformation of the South*, 215-219.; Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 189.

are essential to understanding the questions of decency and acceptability raised by its publication.

Miscegenation and Condemnation

The plotline of the novel centers around the sexual relationship between an educated black woman named Nonnie and a rich white man named Tracy in a small Georgia town during a Christian tent revival. The story begins with Nonnie informing Tracy that she is pregnant with his child and goes on to detail how Tracy attempts to deal with that news. Torn between pleasing his family and being with the woman he loves, Tracy ultimately decides to join the church and marry the white woman his family approves of, and then arranges for Nonnie to marry his black servant Big Henry so that the child will be legitimate. The main conflict of the novel occurs when Nonnie's brother Ed learns of Tracy's plan to cover up the pregnancy and kills Tracy in a fit of rage. Ed quickly leaves town and when Henry finds Tracy's body he is immediately accused of the murder even though many believe he did not actually commit the crime. Henry attempts to hide from the town's authorities but is found and lynched. The novel ends as the white citizens of the town discuss the moral dilemma presented by the lynching of a possibly innocent man and the black citizens prepare for the next day's work.

One of the many ways *Strange Fruit* reveals the intersections of respectability, sexuality, and race within southern society is by demonstrating the

ways in which each topic impacted the life and decisions of Tracy Deen. For instance, Tracy's sexual desire pulls him towards Nonnie but his desire to remain a respectable member of white society forces him to marry within his own race. In a society that values propriety as highly as the white South does, it might seem surprising that a man would abandon the mother of his unborn child to marry someone else and that his church encouraged him to do so. However, Tracy's choice indicates that the expectations of racial behavior in southern society trump all issues of morality or sexual desire.

Smith further demonstrates the intersections of race and sexuality in the mid-century South by using Tracy and Nonnie's affair to implicitly naturalize homosexuality. As she was unable to unreservedly discuss homosexuality due to the strict social constraints of her time, Smith decided to depict another kind of prohibited love: interracial love or miscegenation. Her representation of an interracial relationship served as a vehicle by which Smith subtextually explored homosexual love. She does so by offering Tracy Deen and Nonnie Anderson's relationship as a basis of comparison for the novel's parallel lesbian relationship between Laura Deen and Jane Hardy. Thus, exemplifying how developing models of homo- and heterosexuality were embedded within discourses of race and racialization.

Smith intentionally characterized the love between both Tracy and Nonnie, and Laura and Jane, as healthy, natural and meaningful. She argued the genuineness of outlawed love perhaps most effectively during a scene in which the interracial couple displays affection. Smith wrote: "When she looked again,

his head was in Non's lap. Her hand rubbing his forehead, slow-moving, easy. Fingers moving over temple, back of ear, neck. Fingers moving through his hair, lifting it, letting it fall, lifting it. Like breathing."³¹ In this passage, Smith created a powerful image in the readers' mind by equating the characters' display of affection with one of individuals' most natural, involuntary acts: breathing. She presented their love with sensitivity hoping that doing so would lead readers to respond positively to their relationship. Thus, she subtly suggested that this socially tabooed love was not necessarily deviant or distasteful, but rather was as "natural" as the standard norm of racially segregated heteronormative.

By examining Tracy's challenges over his love for a black woman, the reader is offered a possible parallel to the similar challenges a lesbian might have prior to accepting her sexual orientation as something respectable, rather than unnatural or deviant. For example, while Tracy is away in Marseilles in the armed forces the narrator describes Tracy's need to suppress his sexual desires for Nonnie through statements like "She had been something you tried not to think about."³² Tracy tried not to think about Nonnie, especially in a sexual way, because cultural norms prohibited him from acting on his "deviant" desire.

Within early twentieth century U.S. culture black women, like Nonnie were legally and normatively defined as inferior to white people like Tracy, not his equal, much less a suitable wife. Yet the narrator explains how Tracy's love did not conform to these social norms: "She wasn't a Negro girl whom he had in a strange crazy way mixed his whole life up with. She was the woman he loved.

³¹ Smith, *Strange Fruit*, 17.

³² Smith, *Strange Fruit*, 50.

And he saw her, tender and beautiful, holding in her eyes, her pliant spirit, in the movement of her body, her easy right words, low, deep voice, all that gave his life its meaning.”³³ Smith thus represented their outlawed love as deeply meaningful to both parties which challenges the prevalent assumption that it was inherently wrong and was the result of perverse sexual temptation not love. She characterized Laura and Jane's love similarly, without explicitly labeling them as lesbians, to challenge that same assumption. Smith’s parallel discussion of race and sex as explained by Gary Richards, a professor of English at the University of New Orleans:

“Southern social conventions as Smith understands them construct the ‘race line’ and the ‘sex line’ to be not necessarily the same barrier but to function comparably and to be internalized via the same ideologically seamless process... Smith persists in using the same terminology to characterize how southern society scripts both race relations and the sexualized body.”³⁴

An important method used by Smith to implicitly engage the topic of homosexuality is the many letters exchanged between Laura and Jane that Smith makes central to the novel. The narrator explains “Yes, they did write to each other even though they lived in the same town. They had so much to say. There was so much you could say to Jane that you never had before been able to say to anyone.”³⁵ This section of the text is significant because it reveals the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction*, 104.

³⁵ Smith, *Strange Fruit*, 243.

depth of intimacy within Laura and Jane's relationship carried out in secret through these letters. They wrote to each other frequently, and the fact that they wrote, rather than spoke in person, about "so much" is extremely significant in understanding the underlying motives of Smith's writing. Lillian Smith's novel achieves a poignant message in electing not to give Jane a voice in a novel where she is so extremely careful to give all the other characters a narrative voice. Like Smith herself, the lesbian characters of her novel chose to write about their love in secret because discussing those feelings aloud could have cost them dearly. Thus, through the medium of Laura and Jane's love letters, Smith allows the two lesbian characters to reclaim the voices which social norms had attempted to silence. These complex devices employed by Smith to discuss homosexuality reveal that mid-century understandings of sexuality viewed heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of sexual preference. It can be assumed from Smith's focus on the naturalness of Laura and Jane's love that 1940s conceptions of sexuality not only rejected homosexuality but labeled it as unnatural and a perversion of nature.

The presence of two forms of forbidden love and Smith's attempt to force her readers to sympathize with these "deviants" was more than enough to insight heavy criticism from the conservative members of society. However, the topics of miscegenation and lesbian love are not the portions of the novel that were most fervently opposed by literary critics and censors. The novel also contains scenes of sexual action and sexually explicit language. For instance, the reference to the

sexual assault of Nonnie by Big Henry in her youth.³⁶ The words “fuckin”, “orgasm”, “teat”, and “whore” appear throughout the novel along with detailed descriptions of female bodies such as “nice little rumps, hard from chopping cotton” and references to urination.³⁷ In one scene, Smith describes a rich white man’s penchant for “deflowering” young teachers to avoid syphilis.³⁸ It is these instances that seem to form the bulk of the justifications for the banning of the book whereas the discussion of race and homosexuality is objected to only in the subtext of each review or court ruling. The choice of content for opposition thus reveals its own standard of acceptability as it was respectable to challenge the use of foul language but still too obscene to discuss homosexuality or overt sexual acts in any way.

Critical Reception

African-Americans responded both positively and negatively to *Strange Fruit*. These mixed reviews reveal what the “other side of the color line” considered to be acceptable for a discussion of race and sexuality.³⁹ To begin, W.E.B. Du Bois reviewed the novel for the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* and stated that the novel perfectly depicted “the tragedy of the South...on each page, the reader sees how both elements [white and black] in

³⁶ Smith, *Strange Fruit*, 212.

³⁷ Smith, *Strange Fruit*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁹ Florence Haxton Bullock, “Indian, Negro, and White, Americans All,” *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, March 5, 1944, 1.

Maxwell are caught in a skein that only evolution can untangle or revolution break.” Du Bois asserts that a discussion of race to could appropriately be embedded with despair and pity for the black race most likely due to the generations of African-Americans who felt their plight had been ignored.⁴⁰ However, Dean Gordon B. Hancock of the Associated Negro Press declared that the novel cast the “Negro in a subservient role.”⁴¹ These statements initially appear to conflict in how discussion of race should treat the “negro.” Multiple reviews echo the same sentiments, which suggests that the standards of acceptability for white people to successfully discuss issues of race allowed for the acknowledgement of the tragedy of segregation without the assumption that African-Americans were helpless victims without the skill or desire to rebel against an oppressive system. Based on the prevalence of their push for accurate representation, it can be assumed that mid-century southern African-Americans perceived their respectability and identity to be tied to culture depictions of their races’ place within society.

The most prevalent critique of Smith’s depiction of race in *Strange Fruit* is her characterization of Nonnie. Dean Gordon B. Hancock describes the novel’s unacceptable depiction of Negro womanhood below:

“It is difficult to imagine a more subtle yet scathing indictment against the Negro race in general and Negro womanhood in particular. When Ms. Smith portrays in Nonnie Anderson, a

⁴⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Searing Novel of the South,” *New York Times Book Review*, March 5, 1944, 1-20.

⁴¹ Dean Gordon B. Hancock, “People Who Read and Write,” *New York Times Book Review*, August 5, 1945, 18.

young Negro woman college graduate, no higher ambitions than to be the mistress and concubine of a dissolute poor white man, she stabs at the very heart of the hopes of the Negro race.”⁴²

The quote reflects the opinion of many African-American critics who found it unacceptable for an educated black woman to be ruled by her sexuality.⁴³ The reviews of the novel by Orville Prescott, Florence Haxton Bullock, and Malcom Cowley argue that the depiction of Nonnie as a love-struck woman who refuses to leave a racist and morally questionable man like Tracy, even after he suggests she get an abortion, displays an image of Negro womanhood that is inaccurate and unacceptable if there is ever a hope of achieving racial equality. They argue that this representation of Nonnie conveys a weakness and lack of self-respect in Negro women that is rarely ever attributed to white womanhood. Thus, it can be inferred that Southern African-Americans chose to separate female sexuality and racial womanhood in order to gain recognition of their respectability.

Furthermore, the critics within black communities argued that Smith's depiction of Nonnie's romantic and sexual inclinations reflects her ignorance on the subject. Few individuals in the South engaged in cross-classed cross-raced relationships and while the topic of miscegenation could be helpful in pushing for racial equality, it did not reflect the realities of Negro life in the segregated South. Even though Nonnie was a college educated woman, her racial identity would

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Orville Prescott, "Outstanding Novels," *Yale Review*, Spring 1944.; Bullock, "Indian, Negro, and White, Americans All.,"; Malcom Cowley, "Southways," *New Republic*, March 6, 1944, 322.

always place her in a class beneath Tracy. A black woman of Nonnie's education would have been considered of a higher class within her own race and it would have been most likely expected of her to marry up within the black community.⁴⁴ The fact she is willing to sacrifice a better life and upward mobility for a man who refuses to marry her further proves that Smith's depiction of Nonnie's character does not fit within the expectations and norms of the African-American community. Nonnie's characterization as a submissive and emotionally ruled mistress offended some so much that Smith was barred from the campus of Spellman College, where Nonnie attended school in the novel.⁴⁵ The tension between Smith's and the black community's understanding of race and relationships forms another point of contention between black reviewers and Smith. Diana Trilling's review in the *Nation* describes Smith's inability to accurately portray her African-American characters:

“In conflict with each other, or in family or affectional relationships, her Negroes carry great psychological conviction, but when Miss Smith is inside their minds or trying to characterize them as personalities, they tend to fade or fall into stereotypes...it seems impossible for a member of the dominant group to imagine the way of thinking and feelings of a people who for so many generations have been taught to hide their thinking and feeling.”⁴⁶

Different experiences of the reality of day to day life result in different understandings of respectability between races. Respectability can only come

⁴⁴ Hancock, “People Who Read and Write,” *New York Times Book Review*, 18.

⁴⁵ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 68-70.

⁴⁶ Diana Trilling, “Fiction in Review,” *Nation*, March 18, 1944, 342.

into play once survival is assured. The group that has been taught to hide thoughts and feelings has been so taught in order to survive – not to be respectable. Questioning one’s survival throughout life creates a very different perspective than questioning one’s respectability in day to day life and how can a person from the dominant group truly understand / imagine the mentality of the other? Ultimately Smith falls back on the stereotypical thinking that is as much ingrained in her psyche as the struggle for equality is ingrained in the African-American psyche. Thus, concepts of respectability are further tied to understandings of race and racial difference.

The critical reception of *Strange Fruit* in black communities revealed what was suitable for a discussion of race and sexuality while the reception of the novel in southern white communities reveals what was respectable in terms of Smith’s own race and sexuality. The common objection to Smith’s novel among southern literary critics was her “unjust” treatment of poor southern whites who “have been made to suffer almost as much as the Negroes.”⁴⁷ They believed the novel gave the wrong impression that poor whites were solely responsible for racial violence and criticized Smith for distancing herself from the plight of her own race. In their opinion, it was not acceptable for a southern white woman to make a villain out of other white southerners by mocking the hypocrisy of Christianity and segregation.⁴⁸

Additionally, southern critics like Joseph McSorely repeatedly stated that it was inappropriate and disgraceful for “ ‘the daughter of one of the South’s oldest and finest families’ to recur with such frequency to the subject of urine and privies, and employ such phrases which decent people regard as unprintable.”⁴⁹ This remark suggests that Smith’s sexual language and vulgar topics were unacceptable because her race and class dictated that her sexuality and sexual knowledge remain hidden. Thus, mid-century notions of race and sexuality within white communities reinforced earlier traditions of female domesticity and

⁴⁷ Cowley, “Southways,” 322.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Joseph McSorely, “Review of *Strange Fruit*,” *Catholic World*, May 1944, 182.

respectability. The fact that Joseph McSorely did not acknowledge the novel's representations of homosexuality suggests the power of the mid-century cultural standard against same-sex desire. He has either so fully given into the ideology of heterosexuality has inherently natural that he believes no other form of desire exists and therefore does not recognize the nature of Laura and Jane's relationship, or subscribes to mid-century standards of acceptability regarding sexual preference and believes lesbianism to be a perversion not appropriate to ever discuss.

Another issue that white southerners took with Smith and her novel was that, according to them, her depiction of segregation was about outdated and representative of a southern town "about twenty-five years ago".⁵⁰ Additionally, some critics claimed that Smith presented a distorted view of southern life as interracial affairs were uncommon and lynching had all but stopped.⁵¹ An article in *The Anniston Star* warned its readers not to read *Strange Fruit* unless they wanted their "blood roused by authors who take exceptional cases and make them sound like the general rule".⁵² The refusal of these critics to acknowledge any still present race problems in the South in 1944 implies that it had become acceptable to ignore the true issues of segregation and put forth an image of the South in which its citizens had evolved past the violence and bigotry of racism. It was unacceptable for own of their own to publicly call attention to any remaining racial tensions and challenge the respectable image of the "new south." Additionally, others were more likely take the word of a white southerner as truth than that of a black southerner; therefore, her race provided a sense of validity to her opinions on sexuality and segregation despite her challenges to southern respectability.

Lastly, the reception of *Strange Fruit* and of Smith by her friends and neighbors reveals the interplay between sexuality and respectability in southern society during the early twentieth century. According to Morton Sosna, Smith

⁵⁰ Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, 71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "Strange Fruit," *The Anniston Star*, March 27, 1944.

had the ability “to camouflage social radicalism with a ladylike image.”⁵³ As such she was most likely not viewed as a threat to her white neighbors who often separated the identity of “Miss Lil” from her identity as the author of racially charged and sexually explicit novel. An interview of one of her female neighbors illustrates this separation of Lillian’s respectable white identity from her outspoken sexuality and racial activism:

“Miss Smith is a deeply religious woman who would not have written all that vulgar sexy stuff had not her Northern publisher forced her to in order to sell books.”

This discussion of Smith’s sexuality reveals how mid-century conceptions of female sexuality could not co-exist with personas of white respectability. Smith’s southern neighbors could not reconcile Smith’s image as a middle class white woman with the sexual behavior and explicit language of *Strange Fruit* so they had to justify the impropriety of the novel by blaming her editors and absolving her of any responsibility. The separation of her identities in this scenario demonstrates the ways in which mid-century conceptions of womanhood reinforced the purity and virginity associated with traditional domesticity.

Conclusion

Lillian Smith’s best-selling novel of 1944 demonstrates the parallel development of categories of racial and sexual difference. The materializations of these categories of bodily difference became normative in American culture and

⁵³ Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction*, 191.

are subsequently highly visible in the film and literature of the time. These materializations are evident the novel's content and its critical reception as Smith attempts to combat them by naturalizing perceptions interracial and lesbian love through the examples of Laura and Jane, and Tracy and Deen. The novel goes beyond categories of difference by demonstrating how issues of race, sexuality, and respectability intersected in the lives of mid-century southerners in racially constructed communities. The complexity of this intersection is further revealed by the ways in which members of southern society responded to her depictions of African-Americans and sexual behavior. In conclusion, Smith's controversial novel reveals the complex experiences of segregation, lesbianism, and Jim Crow era violence in a way that aimed to challenge the previous conceptions of its readers.

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