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Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* and Periodical Readerships

SIÂN ROUND

Recent scholarly interest in Lillian Smith and her controversial best-selling novel *Strange Fruit* (1944) has ignored the importance of the magazine she edited with her partner Paula Snelling, *South Today* (1936–45). After considering Smith and Snelling's cultivation of an ideal southern literature through their book reviews, this article reads the short stories Smith published in *South Today,* which functioned as early drafts of *Strange Fruit*. Tracing the significance of the magazine's readers, I argue that the process of editing a magazine shaped the structure and style of Smith's novel, considering what literary magazines can tell us about southern identity.

A review of Lillian Smith's 1944 novel *Strange Fruit* proclaims that it "gives release to emotions long denied adequate outlet in southern literature, and stirs our thinking in a way that perhaps no southern book has ever done before."[1] This review simultaneously categorizes Smith's novel as superlatively southern and as an outlier among southern literature, the latter label given because of the novel's controversial plot. *Strange Fruit* is set in the fictional town of Maxwell, Georgia and follows the relationship between Tracy Deen, a wealthy white man who has recently returned from the First World War, and Nonnie Anderson, an African American college graduate. After Nonnie becomes pregnant, Tracy arranges for her to marry his Black childhood friend, "Big Henry" McIntosh. When Nonnie's brother Ed learns of Tracy's plan, he kills Tracy. Big Henry is blamed for the murder and, in the book's climax, he is lynched by the white townspeople. The novel reflects the lifelong commitment to desegregation and racial equality for which Smith is best known. A friend of Martin Luther King Jr., in the 1950s and 1960s, Smith was an active member of the Congress of Racial Equality and spoke at the first SNCC sit-in. Published before Smith had a wider reputation as an activist, her first novel, *Strange Fruit*, was an immediate hit: it sat at the

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[1] Paula Snelling, "A South against Itself," *South Today*, 8, 1 (Spring–Summer 1944), 20–25, 23.

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top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for several months and, in 1945, was adapted into a Broadway play. Its popularity was matched with controversy, with objections to its depiction of an interracial relationship causing it to be banned in both Boston and Detroit and, for a brief while, from the US postal service. The claim that it "stirs our thinking in a way that perhaps no southern book has ever done before" was seemingly right. At a time when American readers' interest in regionalism was waning, *Strange Fruit* was celebrated for being a regional novel.[2]

This effusive praise came not from any old reviewer, though, but from Paula Snelling, Smith's lifelong partner, and was published in *South Today*, the quarterly magazine the couple edited and published together between 1936 and 1945 from the summer camp they ran in northern Georgia. Between 1936 and the novel's publication, Smith published seven stories that belonged to the world of *Strange Fruit*, the fictional town of Maxwell, in her magazine. The readers of Snelling's praise for the novel had likely already encountered parts of it within the pages of the magazine. They also likely had a sense of what Snelling meant by the inadequacies of southern literature: *South Today* regularly reviewed southern books and tested their readership on their knowledge of the region. This loyal readership was primed not only to buy *Strange Fruit* but to agree with Snelling that Smith's novel was superlatively southern. By examining both Smith and Snelling's cultivation of an ideal southern novel in their book reviews, and the early publication of *Strange Fruit* in *South Today*'s pages, this article puts forward two principal arguments. The first is that Smith's and Snelling's editorial work and writing in the magazine crafted an ideal reader of the novel who would share the author's understanding of racism in the South and of what southern literature should be. The second is that the polyvocal form and style of *Strange Fruit* were shaped by Smith's understanding of readerships gained from her experience as a magazine editor. The dialogic relationship between magazine editor and reader and the magazine's pedagogical possibilities directed Smith's rhetoric about the South and its deeply rooted racial prejudice. Through both arguments, this article seeks to explore how the periodical form shaped conceptions of regional identity in the mid-twentieth-century South.

While she has long been celebrated for her civil rights activism, it is only in recent years that Lillian Smith has received increasing critical attention as a writer. Chapters on Smith's writing have appeared in recent books on southern literature by Michał Choiński and Justin Mellette, and in 2021 the first

[2] Gordon Hutner comprehensively outlines the novel's popularity in *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 227–30.

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collection of essays devoted to her writing was published.[3] Each of these works is interested primarily in Smith's novels or her book-length nonfiction writing, especially the 1949 memoir *Killers of the Dream*. Very little attention has been paid to Smith's magazine or her role as editor. In tracing the history of *Strange Fruit* back to the magazine where the novel first entered the world, this article also hopes to emphasize this significant and understudied part of Smith's early career to show how it shaped the rhetoric that would characterize her later antisegregation and activist writing.

South Today was initially titled *Pseudopodia* and began as a project for the couple to distract themselves from their daily lives running the summer camp and to provide a confidence boost for Snelling, who was recovering from a horse-riding accident. The name reflected the pair's lifelong interest in psychoanalysis (the biological concept of an amoeba-like pseudopod had been used by Freud as an analogy for how the libido reaches out to an object). Smith and Snelling used the pseudopod as a metaphor for their objectives for the magazine. As the magazine's opening editorial sets out,

> A pseudopod differs from an ordinary foot in that it is not a specialized and differentiated organ fully equipped with toenails and callouses but a temporary and tender projection of the nucleus or inner-self, upon the success of whose gropings the nucleus is entirely dependent for its progress and sustenance.[4]

Pseudopodia, they went on to claim, "is too small to roam the world" and so "it will concern itself mainly with the South. Specifically with whatever seems to us artistic, vital, significant which is being done by writers who have their cultural roots here."[5] The editors saw their magazine as a "temporary and tender projection" of the South, which the region needed for its "progress and sustenance."

From this modest beginning, the result was far greater than the editors could have expected. At its height, the magazine sold at least five thousand copies, a number comparable with that of a rival magazine, the Baton Rouge, Louisiana-based Agrarian magazine *Southern Review* (1935–42). After their first volume, the editors sought out a new title and opted for the *North Georgia Review*, subtitled *A Magazine of the Southern Regions*. By 1942, perhaps sparked by the demise of the *Southern Review*, Smith and Snelling adopted the broader title *South Today*, by which I will refer to the magazine here. *Pseudopodia* may

[3] Michał Choiński, *Southern Hyperboles: Metafigurative Strategies of Narration* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Justin Mellette, *Peculiar Whiteness: Racial Anxiety and Poor Whites in Southern Literature, 1900–1965* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021); Tanya Long Bennett, ed., *Critical Essays on the Writings of Lillian Smith* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

[4] "Editorial," *Pseudopodia*, 1, 1 (Spring 1936), 6.

[5] Ibid.

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not have been an enduring title, but its choice is a clear indication that Smith and Snelling were aware of the scope and parameters of their magazine. As we will see, this interest in psychoanalysis provided a vocabulary for the editors throughout *South Today*'s run.

Issues of *South Today* ranged from sixteen pages in its first year to around sixty pages between 1937 and 1940 and over a hundred pages for its final five years, when it had settled on the name *South Today*. Alongside reviews, Smith used her magazine as a vehicle to publish her own writing, including her column "Dope with Lime," in which she frequently reflected on the state of southern culture. Her short stories in the magazine are the focus of this article but *South Today* is better known for publishing many of Smith's most famous essays opposing racial divides in the South, including "Two Men and a Bargain" and "The White Christian and His Conscience." These essays were republished throughout her career in different magazines and in pamphlets that circulated in schools across America. While Smith and Snelling were the most common names in the magazine, the editors also published works by prominent southern writers such as Glenn Rainey and W. J. Cash. Although *South Today* advocated for an end to segregation, only around 10 percent of articles published in the magazine were by African Americans.

Alongside their own and others' contributions, the magazine encouraged an active readership by publishing testimonials in a regular "They Say ..." column, which included letters both praising and criticizing the direction of the magazine. Readers regularly became contributors through a series of essay competitions which invited readers to reflect on southern politics and the unfolding Second World War. The makeup of *South Today*'s subscriber base has been reconstructed by Megan Butchart, who shows that the average subscriber was a middle-class white female and that the magazine had a significant number of subscribers in the Northeast and in California, as well as in the southern states.[6] As the magazine's opening editorial shows, though, Smith and Snelling concerned themselves only with the South, and they expected their readers to share these interests. Beyond just reviews, the magazine regularly included lengthy lists of southern books that had recently been published, as well as testing their readers on their knowledge of these books in prize competitions such as "Do You Know Your South?" Announced in the Autumn 1939 issue, this contest promised, "Our most 'careful reader' will be rewarded not only with $250.00 in cash … but with we hope, a clearer, more ample knowledge and understanding of the land which we all love, defend so

[6] Megan Butchart, "Participatory Readership: Reconstructing the Historical Subscribership of *South Today*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, 61 (2024), 1–49.

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hotly, and, most of us, know so little about."[7] Getting its readers to know their South was the magazine's primary goal.

Because of the magazine's active readership, Smith's editorship of *South Today* provides a useful lens through which we can see how periodicals have been used to shape perceptions of the region. Southernness is often considered a regional identity that is defined by what it is not. The nonexistence of a fixed southern identity and the use of southernness in the proliferation of an (implicitly northern) American identity is the subject of the New Southern Studies, a critical field defined by Houston Baker and Dana Nelson in 2001.[8] Richard Gray summarizes this paradox usefully by arguing, "The South has customarily defined itself against a kind of photographic negative, a reverse image of itself with which it has existed in a mutually determining, reciprocally defining relationship," and that therefore "Southerners start seeing others with a more than usually astringent sense of how others see them; their arguments begin, as it were, *within* an argument already made that has shifted them on to the edge."[9]

The South has been described elsewhere as "an in-between space, a process, an agenda, an itinerary, a discourse, an idea, a relational concept."[10] We might use all of the same words to describe periodicals, which are, as Sean Latham and Robert Scholes emphasize, "collaborative objects, assembled in complex interactions."[11] Magazines require a dialogue to take place between reader, editor, and contributor. But this dialogue is one that is mediated through the editor, who shapes how the other two agents are presented within the publication's pages. A magazine's "discourse" can therefore tell us something about the southern "agenda": an editor is both mediator and arbiter of their magazine's identity. Seriality, the other central feature of the magazine form, reflects the "process" of southern identity. The magazine, as James Mussell identifies, constantly locates itself in a series within which there is always a memory of previous issues and a projection of future issues, meaning that the presentness of the magazine is always "destined to pass."[12]

[7] Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, "Do You Know Your South?", *North Georgia Review*, 4, 2–3 (Autumn 1939), 64.

[8] Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson, "Preface: Violence, the Body and 'The South'," *American Literature*, 73.2 (2001), 231–44.

[9] Richard Gray, "Foreword. Inventing Communities, Imagining Places: Some Thoughts on Southern Self-Fashioning," in Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), xiii–xxiii, xvii.

[10] Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, "Preface: Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies," *American Literature*, 78, 4 (2006), 677–90, 682.

[11] Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," *PMLA*, 121, 2 (2006), 517–31, 529.

[12] James Mussell, "Repetition: Or, 'In Our Last'," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48, 3 (2015), 343–58, 351.

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The magazine has long been a platform where southern editors have questioned regional identity, from the early nineteenth-century *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834–65) to the contemporary Atlanta magazine *Bitter Southerner* (2013–).[13] At a time when publishing houses were based in northern cities, and paper and postage were cheap, the magazine was a way for ideas about the South to circulate around the world. The magazine form offers southern editors a way to define, circulate, and revise their relationship to the region. By tracing how Smith curates a southern identity in *South Today*, we will see how *South Today* uses the affordances of the magazine form to sell the South, and in turn to sell *Strange Fruit*.

South Today's publication coincided with a crisis of southern identity, when Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* epitomized southern antebellum nostalgia and the nation's attention was gradually turning towards the issue of segregation. Lillian Smith had a dual purpose with her magazine: to reshape southern attitudes around race and to launch her career. *Strange Fruit* represented the achievement of both goals, but its story is incomplete without a consideration of the pages where the novel developed. Taking the in-betweenness of southern identity as its starting point, this article is interested in the dialogues that take place between editor and reader within the pages of a magazine, and how they shape depictions and understandings of southern literature. After tracing how *South Today* interacted with its reader base, I will turn to the serial publication of *Strange Fruit* within the magazine, drawing parallels between the evolving structure of Smith's best-selling novel and the magazine form in which it first appeared.

THE GREAT SOUTHERN DROUTH

Snelling's description of *Strange Fruit* as doing what "no southern book has ever done before" comes as a footnote to a review of two 1943 novels, Robert Penn Warren's *At Heaven's Gate* and Bucklin Moon's *The Darker Brother*. Titled "A South against Itself," the review begins by claiming that the two books "gave hope last fall that the century-long drouth in southern fiction is nearing its end."[14] This categorization of a southern drought references H. L. Mencken's famous declaration in 1920 that the South was a "Sahara of the Bozart" (read Beaux Arts) and that "it is impossible for intelligence to flourish" in its atmosphere.[15] While deciding that they lack literary

[13] Siân Round, "Southern Periodical Culture", in Katharine A. Burnett, Todd Hagstette, and Monica Carol Miller, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the US South* (London: Routledge, 2022), 125–28.

[14] Snelling, "A South against Itself," 22.

[15] H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, ed., *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series* (New York: Library of America, 2010; first published 1920), 229–40, 239.

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merit, Snelling deems these two books important because the former demonstrates Warren's move away from Agrarian nostalgia for the South, and in the latter case Moon's novel presents a book about the South but not set in it (*The Darker Brother* concerns an African American who moves from Winter Park, Colorado to Harlem). Snelling's praise for these two novels is centred exclusively on what they contribute to southern literature, or, in her words, how they conquer the "Great Southern Drouth." In making her point, Snelling lands on the usual cast of southern authors – William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Thomas Wolfe, Carson McCullers – and grants them all their own individual failure to represent the region. Her appraisal of *Strange Fruit* is separated from the review, linked to an asterisk which follows this sentence: "But no southern novelist has yet appeared with mind so clear and complex, imagination so rich and unimpeded as to grasp and transcribe into literature the full sweep of the human tragedy which white men have wrought in white and black lives."[16] Snelling's argument is that *Strange Fruit* represents the havoc that racism has wreaked across southern society. Drawing on what had become a common assessment of southern literature by 1944 both within *South Today* and more widely, Snelling offers up Smith's novel as a clean break from what has come before it: an oasis in the Sahara.

Snelling's assessment of the drought in southern literature is a running thread throughout the magazine. Smith and Snelling were voracious readers and around a third of each issue of *South Today* was devoted to reviews of books by southern writers, whose work they often disparaged. The extensiveness of the reviews section in *South Today* has been noted by Jordan J. Dominy, who argues for the inclusiveness of Smith's canon building, citing her "political aims and awareness of global issues" as reason for the inclusion of writers in the magazine who would not receive scholarly recognition for several decades.[17] It is certainly true that, situated within a magazine that increasingly engaged throughout its run with the impact of America joining the Second World War, Smith's and Snelling's book reviews place issues in southern literature in parallel with the escalating global political situation. But Smith and Snelling did not just use their book reviews to establish new southern canons; they used writing from and about the South to diagnose the deep-rooted damage that racial violence and segregation were doing to the region. Book reviews did not just exist in parallel with Smith's political essays because they were both published in the same collaborative text; they were

[16] Snelling, "A South against Itself," 23.

[17] Jordan J. Dominy, "Reviewing the South: Lillian Smith, *South Today*, and the Origins of Literary Canons," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 66, 1 (2013), 29–50, 48.

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methodologically alike, joined in the mutual purpose of understanding the South. The reviews in *South Today* created a joint mind-set of readers who were primed to celebrate *Strange Fruit*, even before it was published.

One example of the editors' assessments of southern literature in order to diagnose the southern condition is an essay called "Southern Fiction and Chronic Suicide" written by Snelling in 1938.[18] The eight-page article is split in two across the issue so that it is both the lead essay, following Smith's editorial, and occupies the final page. The article begins with a definition of chronic suicide from American psychologist Karl Menninger, whose attempts to introduce psychoanalysis into public discourse were much admired by Smith and Snelling. The term "chronic suicide" refers to individuals whose destructive tendencies cripple their ability to function. The pair's interest in this notion of self-destruction from the recently published *Man against Himself* (1938) reflects their growing obsession with psychoanalysis, which we saw in their initial choice of the title *Pseudopodia*. In the article, Snelling takes Menninger's thesis and applies it to the malfunctioning of southern identity, as demonstrated in fiction. Snelling argues first that, because characters in southern novels are so closely defined by their skin colour, the "unwillingness to concede dignity to … black characters" makes white characters no more than a simulacrum of humanity.[19] Her second claim is that southern fiction lacks sufficient exploration of feeling or motivation, and relies instead on stereotype, which serves to elevate the white aristocracy who form the principal characters of most southern novels. In Snelling's view, southern literature should always address race issues:

> In sections other than the South, however, it is not necessarily incumbent upon a realistic writer that he concern himself with the psychic agitations growing out of racial relationships … But the black segments of southern life can no more be ignored than can the black squares on a check board … To ignore them is to exemplify pathological blindness.[20]

The southern mode of self-destruction, then, is authors' unwillingness to treat African American characters as human, or, even worse, to not include them at all.

I dwell on the opening argument of this article, which is in content similar to several of Smith's and Snelling's other assessments of southern literature in the magazine, because it encapsulates what Jay Garcia describes as Smith's "psychological idiom"; the importance of psychological inquiry to her thought was such that she perceived racism to be a symptom, the causes of

[18] Paula Snelling, "Southern Fiction and Chronic Suicide," *North Georgia Review*, 3, 2 (Summer 1938), 3–6; 25–28. [19] Snelling, "A South against Itself," 4. [20] Ibid., 6.

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which she thought should be diagnosed in southern literature.[21] While Smith and Snelling's approach to racism as a symptom of wider issues is not unique, what is important is that their interest in psychology meant that the editors of *South Today* believed the goal of southern fiction, and literature more broadly, to be diagnostic, a quality that we will see in *Strange Fruit*. The magazine provided a testing ground for Smith to develop this psychological idiom, which comes about through a desire to educate their readers.

The year after Snelling's "Southern Fiction and Chronic Suicide," Smith's "Dope with Lime" column again assessed the field of southern literature, diagnosing the eight ruts into which southern writers are prone to fall. These writing ruts lead authors to fail to acknowledge the psychological roots of segregation and racial violence, Smith argued. The pathologizing word "chronic" is used again here, although this time to refer to Smith's own behaviour: "Despite a kind of chronic euphoria of expectation as to the future of southern literature, we have acute seizures of melancholia after each sampling of the current output."[22] The following list of southern ruts continues this diagnostic methodology. Many of these ruts – "The Manicurists," "The Antique Dealers," and "Life's Softeners and Purifiers" – centre on sentimentality and dwelling on the past, while others, like the "Dixie Dirt Dobblers" and "The Pips," are assigned to those who have an overreliance on the filth and depravity of southern life.[23] The most famous southern authors, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner, are placed in the category of "Finger Painters" since they take vocabulary, place it on a sheet of paper, and randomly stir it up until it becomes incomprehensible. Smith mixes metaphors throughout this editorial. The idea of ruts refers to a worn-out road surface driven on by new writers on "the old steep road to greatness," and some of the types of rut fit this metaphor.[24] Most ruts, however, refer to professions, like "The Antique Dealers," occupations like "Finger Painters," or organizations, like the "U.W.C.s," or United Writers of the Confederacy. While the division of southern writers into these categories is clearly dismissive, the metaphors used move away from the biological framing that Smith and Snelling had previously used to diagnose the literary scene. The problems of southern literature may be chronic, but they are a product not of the failures of the body but of "The Manicurists," "Antique Dealers," and "Finger Painters" who refuse to go beneath the surface to examine the South. These ruts are referred to throughout the rest of the magazine's run (for example, in 1940, Snelling assesses that

[21] Jay Garcia, *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 102–35.
[22] Lillian Smith, "Dope with Lime," *North Georgia Review*, 4, 1 (Spring 1939), 2–4, 32, 4.
[23] Ibid., 4, 32.
[24] Ibid., 4.

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Carson McCullers's debut novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* does not fit into any of them) and so provide a vocabulary through which Smith and Snelling can evaluate and shape canons of southern literature.[25]

These assessments were printed alongside Smith's fiction and essays, creating a relationship where the reader both learns the deficiencies of southern literature and is provided examples of what it should be doing. More than just the editors giving themselves a vocabulary, the magazine provided readers with the tools to assess southern literature. These reviews existed within the same collaborative text as Smith's articles and stories. Readers were thereby primed to see Smith as a southern writer who did not fall into these ruts, and to identify the importance of their engagement with the root causes of southern racism. The pedagogical role that Smith took as an editor guiding her readers extends into her stories in the magazine, to which I now turn.

THE FABRIC OF A SMALL TOWN

In an unpublished interview, likely one she conducted with herself, Smith responded to the question of how long it took to write *Strange Fruit* with the following:

> Seven years. The book grew slowly. It was conceived as a whole, and then details were slowly filled in. Sometimes I worked on the third chapter; sometimes on the twentieth. The book was an organic whole in my mind all the time I was working on it, but it was not written consecutively.[26]

This response is not quite accurate: the structure and plot of Smith's novel changed substantially over the time she was writing it. *Strange Fruit* was originally titled "The Harris Children's Town" and then changed to the enigmatic "Jordan Is So Chilly," and finally to "Strange Fruit."[27] The manuscript similarly changed in direction. "The Harris Children's Town" was conceived as a series of vignettes focusing on a white southern family whose children gradually come to learn about racism, akin to the plot of Faulkner's "That Evening Sun." It was not until around 1941, three years

[25] Paula Snelling, "*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*," *North Georgia Review*, 5, 3–4 (Winter 1940–41), 59; Snelling, "Out of the Gulf Stream," *North Georgia Review*, 5, 3–4 (Winter 1940–41), 59

[26] Lillian Smith, "Lillian Smith Answers Some Questions about *Strange Fruit*." This manuscript remained unpublished until 2012, when it appeared in the *Georgia Review*'s special issue on *Celebrating the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame*, 66, 3 (2012), 474–79, 478.

[27] The title "Jordan Is So Chilly" was borrowed from a poem by Lola Pergament published in the *North Georgia Review*, 3, 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1938–39), 10.

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before the novel's publication, that the plot about a star-crossed interracial relationship emerged.

Smith's self-interview also elides a significant part of the manuscript's development. Between 1936 and 1944, Smith published excerpts of her evolving novel in *South Today* alongside the magazine's critical assessments of southern literature. Each excerpt was accompanied by an indication that this story would soon form part of a full-length novel. *South Today*'s readers, shaped into experts in southern literature, were ready to buy *Strange Fruit* long before it even had that title. The sequence of stories published in *South Today* which belong to the world of *Strange Fruit*, by which I mean that they contain characters who appear in the novel or are set in the fictional Maxwell, is as follows: a short narrative about Maxwell from the perspective of the Harris children, including descriptions of some of the local figures; a story about Big Granny, whose attitudes align with the Old South, and her visit to the Harris children; an excerpt in which Charlie Harris explains to his sister Harriet the meaning and implications of hell; two sketches set in Maxwell, the first about Mrs. Pusey's children who died at birth and the second about Dee and Bill, two local rednecks; a story about the Harris children playing with their Black friend and discovering the differences in their genitalia and later being punished by their parents; two chapters from *Strange Fruit* in which Dee and Bill organize the lynch mob hunting for Henry McIntosh, then the Black chauffeur Sam Perry begs Tom Harris to hide Henry, only for it to be too late, with the extract ending on the brutal lynching; and another chapter from *Strange Fruit* where Tracy Deen remembers his Mamie and his first discovery of racial difference.[28]

Both the contents of the stories and their placements within the magazine tell us about the significance of Smith's editorial role to her development as a novelist. The sequence of events of these stories, when placed together, is entirely different from the eventual novel. Even in the years when the novel had essentially been written, Smith did not serialize parts of *Strange Fruit*, but rather included the stories she thought would be the most sensational to readers. The stories in the magazine place a great emphasis on characters who would end up being minor in *Strange Fruit*, most notably the Harris family. Of course, the publication of Smith's stories was not ever meant to

[28] Lillian Smith, "The Harris Children's Town – Maxwell G.A.," *Pseudopodia*, 1, 1 (Spring 1936), 3–4, 9–12; Smith, "Big Granny," *Pseudopodia*, 1, 2 (Summer 1936), 4–5, 15–16; Smith, "Exegesis," *North Georgia Review*, 2, 4 (Winter 1937–38), 7–8, 10; Smith, "Two Sketches," *North Georgia Review*, 3, 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1938–39), 19–21; Smith, "Figs and Doodle Bugs," *North Georgia Review*, 5, 1 (Spring 1940), 15–22; Smith, "Jordan Is So Chilly," *North Georgia Review*, 5, 3–4 (Winter 1940–41), 31–43; Smith, "Georgia Primer," *South Today*, 7, 3 (Spring 1943), 29–33.

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be a serialization, nor is it fair to assume that there was a sustained or attentive enough readership to piece together a narrative from these discrete excerpts. Still, however, each story in *South Today* explicitly belonged to a future novel, and it is safe to speculate that at least some readers devoted their attention to its unfurling over the eight years of the magazine's run before the novel's publication. In thinking through several of these stories, this section places the novel's development alongside the magazine's dialogue with its readers.

The reader's first introduction to "The Harris Children's Town," in the very first issue of the magazine, is to Maxwell, Georgia, the fictional town based on Smith's hometown of Jasper, Florida. We are told,

> There are ten thousand other little towns of the size of Maxwell Georgia, all very like Maxwell, all a little different but it happened that the Harris children were not born in any of these. They were born in Maxwell. And Maxwell was the warp on which the small patterns of their lives were woven. From which they never cut themselves loose. Though some tried. Tried and found that they were only carrying Maxwell with them, wherever they went. As every child grown in a little town carries it forever with him until the threads rot and fall to dust.[29]

Smith establishes a metaphor here of the town as a fabric which both contains its people and weaves itself onto their lives. Maxwell is the warp – in weaving terms the yarn which is held taut while the weft is woven in – onto which the children's lives are designed. Warp has a more common second meaning, however, of twisting out of shape, disrupting the pattern, which Smith often uses to refer to the distortion of southern society.[30] The town serves as both a canvas for the children's lives and a determining factor for the pattern, or distortion, it will take.

The narrative of this first story replicates the idea of weaving: following the perspective of a Harris child, and addressed in the second person, the story's focus shifts between "Maxwell's eighteen hundred human beings swirling in little slow eddies."[31] The reader is taken on a journey through the town, stopping at the different buildings where we find Miss Ada, Opie Culpepper, Mr. Pusey, and Dr. Munson, before finally going into Colored Town. Here, the weaving metaphor is provided a different context: this is a cotton town, reliant on the backbreaking labour of Black workers. Walking through Colored Town, the reader is pushed off the sidewalk and grows angry. It is here that the reader is most explicitly part of the woven fabric:

[29] Smith, "The Harris Children's Town," 3.
[30] For example, in *Killers of the Dream* (London: Cresset Press, 1950), 30, Smith refers to the "warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth."
[31] Smith, "The Harris Children's Town," 3.

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On Monday they would be once more quiet, respectful laborers and as laborers comprehensible and well-liked but now, maddened at the insult of being pushed into sandspurs, an insult you knew well was intended for your white color and not a personal you, you felt Them as you felt Them in the thick, black mobs on Saturday nights down town where you never went if you were a Harris girl, or any other nice white Maxwell girl, unattended by an adult white male. There threading your way through the black strong-smelling mass of flesh and bone and muscle clothed in blue overalls worn alike by mill hands, cotton hands, turpentine hands, you knew that unnamed always untalked-about fear of the Negro …[32]

The reader, taking on the position of the Harris children, is carried through the town on a metaphorical woven fabric but the actual hands which produce the cotton are grotesque and dangerous. The narrative takes on the warp of the cotton, demonstrating how the perceptions of the explicitly white "you," who is both the imagined reader of the story and the real reader of *South Today*, are shifted by underlying racist views, even for those readers who might consider themselves opposed to segregation. Smith uses her weaving metaphor to diagnose the racial prejudice embedded within the southern condition, not only of her fictional characters, but of her readers too.

This weaving metaphor is repeated in the Fall–Winter 1938–39 issue in which Smith outlines, before her two sketches, the plan for her novel to have a long preface which would operate as a kind of rollcall of the cast of hundreds,

most of whom do no more in the novel than brush by the reader and pass quickly out of sight. But of them is made the fabric of a small town, the texture into which is woven the more distinct – though perhaps no more significant – designs of the "principal characters" with whom the story is primarily concerned.[33]

This model of a seemingly rhizomatic network is similarly described through the language of craft, imbuing the town's texture with a sense of its construction, and, with it, ephemerality; its threads can "rot and fall to dust." Smith's model for Maxwell, Georgia reproduces the form of the magazine, with various voices coming in and out, some more distinct but not necessarily less significant. The magazine has a texture of readers, who both follow and shape its direction from issue to issue. The periodical form provides a central pattern for how Smith initially constructs her novel. The readers whose words have seeped into the magazine through essay prizes and letters to the editor and whose opinions about the South she shaped through her reviews have become the novels' characters.

[32] Ibid., 11.
[33] Lillian Smith, "Two Sketches," *North Georgia Review*, 3, 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1938–39), 19.

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In *Strange Fruit*, this texture, and the novel's structure, change again. The penultimate chapter of the novel ends with a description of the town in the wake of the lynching:

> And after a time Maxwell Georgia slept. As still as only the weary can be, it lay – splotched dark against flat stretches of cotton; tied to them by roads which wound their white threads through cottonfields, past black pinelands, around ponds, under great oaks, on, on, on, in the night.[34]

The town is still mapped onto a piece of fabric but here it loses the intricate "design" or "pattern" of a seemingly cohesive and interconnected network of people. It is instead "splotched" onto the cotton. The connections described here are not between people but the roads that connect the parts of the town. The white threads are wound, not woven, as if the connection between the characters is not some careful pattern but rather they are yoked together, all bound by the same suffering and ignorance. In *Strange Fruit*, Smith keeps this metaphor of weaving that emerges from and mimics the idea of her magazine, but with an emphasis not on community but on location: the characters are a product of their southern town. By following Smith's metaphor of the town as a fabric across the magazine stories to the published novel, we can see a continuous interest in the design that individuals make on social structures, and conversely how physical location can warp perception.

While the reader may have disappeared from this description of the town in the final novel, the structuring influence of the periodical remains. The penultimate chapter of *Strange Fruit* shifts between different figures in the town reacting to the events that have taken place, in a stylistic mode similar to Smith's original intention for the novel and mimicking the composition of voices across the pages of an issue of *South Today*. The final character that the narration lands on is Prentiss Reid, the editor of local newspaper the *Maxwell Press*. Throughout the novel, Smith's fictional newspaperman is described as a "radical" in private but he "observe[s] the publishing amenities of southern tradition" in his paper.[35] This hypocrisy is seen in the penultimate chapter, in which Reid is up late worrying about how to phrase his editorial on the events: "Anything you say now will do more harm than good."[36] He thinks instead about writing about the need for a paved road, a safe topic. He then curses the ignorance and poverty of the South before rapidly writing a consciously pandering editorial about the need to move on from the events and the Black man's place, ending with a dismissal of northern criticism.

[34] Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1992; first published 1944), 368. [35] Ibid., 45, 46. [36] Ibid., 365.

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"That'll fix it, he said aloud, and laid the copy on the table. Puts right on our side. Makes us all sorry for ourselves. Well, that's what they want, and *The Maxwell Press* aims to please."[37] The newspaper reflects the town back on itself. Comparing Reid's role to those of small-town journalists in American fiction, like Sherwood Anderson's George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Gavan Lennon astutely links Smith's critique of Reid to her disdain for local media's moderate line, as exemplified in her 1956 speech "The Right Way Is Not the Moderate Way." Within her diagnosis of "the newspaper as part of the typology of the fictional southern town that fails to challenge its racial status quo," Smith is also setting herself and her publication up as a foil.[38] *South Today* very consciously defied the status quo and encouraged its readers to do the same. At the end of the chapter, Reid finishes writing his article, picks up a pencil, and begins to draw a man on a piece of paper. Where Reid's limp critique ends, Smith's third-person narrator steps in. This is where we have the passage with Maxwell "splotched dark against flat stretches of cotton." With Reid, Smith deploys the same critique that she and Snelling used in their book reviews, dismissing southern authors for not exposing the South's embedded racism. *Strange Fruit* makes us ask, into which of Smith's eight ruts does Reid fall?

Smith's initial plans for her novel demonstrate that she saw its function as similar to that of her magazine: a didactic exposure of the roots of racism in the South oriented around a large community that come in and out. In its final form, *Strange Fruit*'s structure has changed but the values of her editorship continue to direct the narrative. Prentiss Reid fails as an editor, in Smith's eyes, because he sees his role as mediator rather than arbiter of public opinion.

WITHIN THE PAGES

Through tracing *Strange Fruit*'s development in *South Today*, we can see how Smith's experience of editing the magazine shaped her narrative. Beyond the changes in the text of *Strange Fruit* from its earlier versions to its final publication, the different context of publication played an important role in how the story developed and how Smith saw her novel in relation to other southern fiction. Smith further curated her ideal reader who would share her views on racism in the South and shaped perceptions of the novel by juxtaposing her stories with articles by African American writers or stories about race. A year before the publication of *Strange Fruit*, Smith published an extract

[37] Ibid., 367.
[38] Gavan Lennon, *Living Jim Crow: The Segregated Town in Mid-century Southern Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 59.

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from the novel in the magazine, under the title "Georgia Primer." The story is taken from the first third of *Strange Fruit*, in which Tracy Deen remembers his Mamie, mother to his childhood best friend Henry, who lived at the end of the Deens' garden. He particularly remembers a time when he was eight and Mamie witnessed her son deliberately collide with a rude white girl on a bike; Mamie whips Henry, teaching him never to talk to a white girl like that. Tracy is scarred by the event, and goes home to find his entire world shaken, causing him to lash out at his own mother. In the final part of the story, the boys are playing together again, and overhear an argument between Mamie and Henry's father, Ten. Ten is angry that she has beaten her own child, but Mamie asserts, "He got to learn there's white folks and black folks and things you can't do if you wants to live."[39] Tracy learns from this fight that he must always be right, since he is white. Here Smith shows how racial codes are not only upheld by white people but that Black people must obey them for their own safety. Even more harrowing is the event's effect on Tracy, who goes from his entire world being disturbed – Tracy's journey home is tortuous, as he tries "to fill the empty dimensions of a life he had not chosen" – to feeling a swell of pride at his perceived racial superiority.[40] In the novel, this passage provides the context for Tracy's irrational and cruel actions towards Nonnie. As an excerpt in a magazine, it is a violent narrative of the prevalence and persistence of racial divides which act as a "primer" in Georgia society, a textbook through which racist views are ingrained. The isolated story indicates the didacticism that is woven into the novel.

Within *South Today*, our understanding of what to take from the story is dependent on the two articles published either side of it. "Georgia Primer" directly follows a short sketch by African American poet Sterling A. Brown which the magazine notes will soon be published in Brown's book *A Negro Looks at the South*. Brown's piece, "Words on a Bus," is, in contrast, much less dramatic. The editorial note claims, "The little sketch is among Mr. Brown's minor writings – yet it captures in an ingratiating way a country-folk quality which is good to remember … as people cease to be people and become 'insoluble problems.'"[41] This "country-folk quality" renders the story quaint, despite the latter part of the sentence's emphasis on the story's humanity. The sketch is a first-person narrative of a Black man on a bus who witnesses a reunion between old acquaintances sitting in the white part of the bus. The man, Amos, has recently been left by his girlfriend, who moved up north, and

[39] Smith, "Georgia Primer," 32.
[40] Ibid., 30.
[41] "Editor's Note" to Sterling Brown, "Words on a Bus," *South Today*, 7, 3 (Spring 1943), 26–28, 27.

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fruitlessly attempts to flirt with a seemingly happily married woman. Brown's book never materialized – although an edited collection of his works intended for the book was published as *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* in 2007 – nonetheless it is significant that Smith chose to place her excerpt next to Brown's, promoting the texts as excerpts from two important southern works that were soon to hit the shelves.[42] Brown was a prominent voice on African American life in the South following the 1932 publication of *Southern Road* and his regular reviews in *Opportunity*, and placing her writing alongside his cemented the role Smith wanted to occupy. The positioning of "Georgia Primer" within the magazine reinforces its relevance to both African American fiction and southern discussions of racial issues.

This is further solidified on the page after Smith's story, where an uncredited article titled "Race Press," most likely written by one of the editors, comments on how an Atlanta paper was faced with an "insoluble problem" when the wife of one of the most prominent African Americans in the city died, since they did not know whether to use "Mrs." or her first name.[43] Smith has already applied the paper's wording of the "insoluble problem" of Black people in Atlanta to Brown's story, which comes first sequentially, and, in that way, sandwiches her own story between the two linked pieces. The Atlanta paper chose instead not to mention the death at all, and the *South Today* article calls out the hypocrisy from a paper which had recently contained "a heated column … about Negro racists and the Northern Negro press."[44] Smith's critique here is comparable to her treatment of Prentiss Reid in *Strange Fruit*. "Race Press" includes reprinted comments by the *Little Review*'s Margaret Anderson and managing editor of the *New Republic* Tom Sancton supporting and encouraging the Negro press. With her placement of this story, Smith slots herself into a culture of writing about race, places her voice alongside two of the most prominent magazine editors of the time, and criticizes other southern periodicals for failing to address racism adequately.

Smith's editorial decision here emphasizes her understanding of the magazine as a composite text. The way we read magazine pieces is shaped by how and where they appear. By the time "Georgia Primer" was published in *South Today*, *Strange Fruit* was close to publication. Its inclusion in the issue was a conscious choice that paired Smith's writing with that of Sterling Brown and with stories of southern segregation. Indeed, a similar association took place with Smith's late decision to retitle the novel. Smith claims

[42] John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders, eds., *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[43] "Race Press," *South Today*, 7, 3 (Spring 1943), 33–35. [44] Ibid.

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not to have borrowed the name from the song "Strange Fruit," first written by Abel Meeropol in 1937 and made famous by Billie Holiday in 1940, which uses the term "strange fruit" to refer to the lynched body. She does acknowledge, though, to Frank Taylor, her editor at Reynal and Hitchcock, that it was "all the better" that the song existed.[45] Smith's editorial work enabled her to direct how her stories should be read – a mind-set that extended to her positioning of the finished novel. In their editorials, Smith and Snelling set out the objective for southern literature to deal with issues of segregation and racial violence, problems that they diagnosed as central to the southern condition. The layout of the magazine asserted that these subjects were exactly what *Strange Fruit* was going to address.

"AUTHOR OF *STRANGE FRUIT* SHARES HER MAIL"

I return in this final section to thinking about how *Strange Fruit* was promoted in *South Today*, and what this might tell us about the novel's ambitions and how they relate to the magazine form. In Snelling's footnote to the Warren and Moon review, where *Strange Fruit* receives effusive praise, she promises a more extensive review of *Strange Fruit* in the following issue. This review never appeared. Instead, Smith offers her own response to the novel, in the form of an extended piece about opening her fan mail, "Author of *Strange Fruit* Shares Her Mail."[46] The strangely impersonal, newspaper-style description of Smith as "Author of *Strange Fruit*" presents the article as a scoop for the magazine, despite most readers knowing that the book was the work of its editor. In this article, Smith goes through some of the letters she has received, both negative and positive (although she asserts that 95 percent of letters praise the book), half of which are from southern readers and half from northern, half from white readers and half from African Americans. She claims that "as far as we can see, liking or disliking *Strange Fruit* has no correlation with race, sex, geography, or religion."[47] The novel, according to the author, has universal appeal. Smith asserts these statistics with a series of extracts from various letters she has received spanning over ten pages, and she uses these letters in effect to review her own book. Negative reviews – like the Californian man who classes the novel as "the nastiest I ever read" – are balanced out with positive ones – which generally describe the novel as "universal" or "moving" or "significant" – such that

[45] Lillian Smith to Frank Taylor, quoted in Margaret Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 71–72.
[46] "Author of Strange Fruit Shares Her Mail," *South Today*, 8, 2 (Winter 1944–45), 75–87.
[47] Ibid., 77.

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the reader of *South Today* seemingly gets a full perspective of the reader of *Strange Fruit*.[48]

These extracted letters are all anonymous, although Smith has carefully selected biographical details to accompany the words. Some readers are marked by their geographical location, be it northern or southern, or their race, others by their profession, and it is difficult not to attempt to identify letter writers such as "a famous anthropologist" and "a well-known psychiatrist."[49] The reviews are not only letters; a mixed review claiming, "This woman has written what she doesn't know about. But I have to say, things like that do happen in my community," was apparently "overheard on a Pullman train."[50] The effect is such that *Strange Fruit* is seemingly the talk of the town, a subject of discussion in every educated home. The quantity and variety of reviews make it hard for them all to seem real, but still the combined effect of these voices indicates the range of readerships of the novel, and the ideal reader Smith wanted to encourage. The cumulative effect of the reviews mimics the accumulation of different voices in the novel. By alternating positive and negative reviews, Smith weaves her own readers into a texture, creating her own Maxwell within the magazine. The threads wear away, however. After the first few pages, the negative critiques disappear and instead the positive reviews become more specific. The space between the novel and its readers is flattened: various readers identify the fictional Maxwell as being indistinguishable from the town in which they were raised and comment that they were so taken by the novel that they stayed up all night reading it and then passed it around their friends and family. The magazine reader ultimately leaves with no doubt that *Strange Fruit* is worth their time. This article exposes the technique that occurs in both magazine and novel. The accumulation of multiple, contradictory voices gives way to a clear, didactic message of what readers should think about the South and its fiction: namely, that Smith's novel was tackling the most pressing issue in the South, the impact of segregation and racial violence on the regional psyche, while avoiding the ruts so often fallen into by her contemporaries.

Scholarship on letters to the editor is generally centred on the networks they create for the reader, which, in Carey Snyder and Leif Sorensen's view, "affords readers the opportunity to craft a print identity," and, for Eurie Dahn, "allows for the destabilization of the authorial voice."[51] Readers are able to inject their own subjectivities into the magazine and thereby help to determine its identity.

[48] Ibid., 78. [49] Ibid., 84–85. [50] Ibid., 81.

[51] Carey Snyder and Leif Sorensen, "Letters to the Editor as a Serial Form," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 9, 1 (2018), 123–46, 128; Eurie Dahn, *Jim Crow Networks: African American Periodical Cultures* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 105.

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Even if letters are faked by the editor, they still give the impression of an external opinion and thus represent the readerly subjectivities that supposedly make up the magazine. In *South Today*, though, something different is happening in the overwhelming number of printed letters. Letters to the editor in *South Today*, most simply, are a promotional tactic, used in the same way as the regular "They Say …" testimonial feature placed at the beginning of most issues, in which both famous southern intellectuals and anonymous readers would praise the magazine. Smith uses these anonymous external voices to boost her own, relying on the readership cultivated over the previous eight years of the magazine's circulation to read between the lines of the letters and identify which should be listened to and which mocked.

Beyond the commercial rationale, though, we can also see these reviews mimicking the piling of voices that characterized Smith's fiction, from "The Harris Children's Town" to *Strange Fruit*. Through her editorship of the magazine, Smith learnt how to weld her readership into a like-minded community, all sharing a common aim of identifying and improving the southern condition. These readers became the inhabitants of *Strange Fruit*'s Maxwell, whose voices weave together but are ultimately determined by their southern location. In sharing her mail, Smith provides the most sustained reader presence across *South Today*'s run. As in *Strange Fruit*, she navigates the many voices until they are one, guided by a prevailing editorial voice.

CONCLUSION

The Winter 1944–45 issue ended up being *South Today*'s last. Smith became too busy with the novel's success and the development of the Broadway play of *Strange Fruit* to continue editing. It is well documented how authors published their writings in little magazines in order to gain new readerships and to test out different audiences, but less has been said about the editor appearing as a writer within their own magazine. Smith's Maxwell stories make up only a small percentage of her writings in the magazine, existing in conjunction with her editorials, reviews, and later articles, which makes it hard not to read these fictional works from her political perspective. *South Today* did not offer a way for Smith to test her work in different platforms but rather one to build up a coherent readership for her novel of people who shared her conviction that segregation was the South's greatest problem. This article has shown the reciprocal relationship between Smith and Snelling and the readers of their magazine. The magazine functioned as an educational tool by which Smith and Snelling tested their readers on what southern literature should be and what issues it should address, which in turn made it a commercial tool to promote Smith's own southern novel. Equally significant was the readers' impact on the shape of the novel which developed within the

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magazine's pages. *South Today*'s readers became the fictional inhabitants of Maxwell, Georgia, who in turn reflected the readers' lives back at them. The editorial process of *South Today* – curating an identity across issues, navigating and shaping readers' expectations, compiling a wide range of contributions – provided a model for Smith when writing *Strange Fruit*.

In the conclusion to his great work of southern intellectual history, *The Idea of the American South, 1920–41*, Michael O'Brien writes, "The Southern idea was but the prism itself, flickering and mobile, both defined by the lights and changing with them: periodically, its facets would be recut and its rays differently disposed."[52] Adapting O'Brien's words slightly, this essay has sought to consider how the South has been recut *periodically*; that is, through periodicals. For O'Brien, the prism which was the idea of the South "was a common property, on whose broad back one could rear the details of one's particular vision."[53] Because the idea of the South was so fragmented, it looked different to each person, and because the idea of the South was a "common property," an individual could create it into whatever they wanted. "Periodically" the South is shattered and reconstituted, occupying a different space for a different reader who, even within a single issue, constructs the South they want to read. What this article has shown is how magazine editing shaped Lillian Smith's rhetoric about the South, and how this experience continued beyond the magazine to *Strange Fruit*. In the face of the "great southern drouth" and the pervading injustices of Jim Crow America, Smith used her editorship of *South Today* to create a dialogue with her readers, through which she worked out how the South could be defined periodically.

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[52] Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920–41* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 223. [53] Ibid., 226.

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