

Research Proposal: Lillian Smith's Rhetorical Activism

Introduction

Lillian Smith (1897-1966), whose largely unrecognized writings provide the grounding for my dissertation research, was a public intellectual who, from 1936 until her death from cancer in 1966, wrote prolifically and spoke avidly for human rights and against all forms of injustice. She published seven books, fiction and non-fiction, and in 1936 with her partner Paula Snelling, Smith launched and edited a literary journal (the publication transitioned in name from *Pseudopodia* to *The North Georgia Review* to *South Today*) that published works by African American and white writers. Devoted to social criticism and change in the South, the journal began with 25 subscribers and, when Paula and Lillian decided to close the journal more than a decade later, ended with 10,000 subscribers. In 1944, Smith's first book, *Strange Fruit*, a novel about an inter-racial love affair, sold three million copies, and the success of the book catapulted Smith into the public sphere. Smith became a regular public speaker about human rights and was honored extensively, addressing organizations such as the Arkansas Council on Human Welfare, The Fellowship of Southern Churchman, and the Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change; she was invited to speak at numerous rallies and universities, on Paris radio, at many commencement addresses, and she received many honorary awards and memberships from organizations as various as the National Council of Negro Women and the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress; she even earned an honorary doctorate at Oberlin College. Martin Luther King, Jr. mentions her by name in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Yet despite public recognition during her lifetime few people remember her, and generally speaking, the few scholars who do speak of Smith, speak of her through the lens of Civil Rights, theology, or literature. Although Margaret Rose Gladney and a few other scholars (Johnson, Watson, Ratcliffe) have reclaimed some of Smith's work on gender, sexuality, and

race, her work has been given far too little attention considering its relevance to contemporary global issues. Smith's works address the need for fundamental and widespread societal changes, and I therefore feel that her work deserves reinvigoration for its rhetorical and political sphere activity, especially with respect to Smith's prescient attention to issues of difference, exclusion, and privilege since her theoretical work in these areas has not yet been examined.

Indeed, no one has recognized Smith as the consummate rhetorician and public sphere theorist she was (nor has Smith's work been interrogated for the ways in which it troubles many histories, such as the histories of American feminism between the waves, whiteness studies, and postmodern rhetorical theories of difference and affect). For my dissertation, I aim to mine Smith's work for its contributions to contemporary political sphere theories, particularly with respect to the notion of privilege. Few contemporary political sphere theorists have elaborated the effects of privilege, and I credit Smith's attention to privilege for focusing my attention on the topic, specifically in the ways that a fuller understanding of privilege contributes—significantly so—to current discussions of social justice and the accommodation of “difference.”

Review of Literature

The Inclusion of Women in the Rhetorical Tradition

Recently, many historians of rhetoric have worked diligently to integrate women into the history of rhetoric in order to “interrupt the seamless narrative usually told about the rhetorical tradition” (Lunsford 6), a narrative that for centuries ignored women's contributions to rhetoric. Such work includes *Rhetoric Retold* by Cheryl Glenn, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women* by Jacqueline Jones Royster and anthologies of women's rhetoric, such as *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* and *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, and *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, a canonical history used in many rhetoric

classrooms, illustrates the newness of this move by its inclusion of writings of women in its 2001 second edition but not in its first edition in 1992.

In *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, Andrea Lunsford elucidates the contributions women have made in reframing the way rhetoric is conceptualized:

The characteristic tropes for a reclaimed Rhetoric include, therefore, not only definition, division, and synecdoche, but also metonymy, metaphor, and consubstantiality; its characteristic and principal aim is not deception or conquest—as Locke and much of the familiar rhetorical tradition would have it—but understanding, exploration, connection and conversation....[T]he realm of rhetoric has been almost exclusively male not because women were not practicing rhetoric—the arts of language are after all at the source of human communication—but because the tradition has never recognized the forms, strategies, and goals used by many women as “rhetorical.” (6)

Smith’s Rhetorical Prowess

Smith’s writings clearly meet many of the qualities Lunsford attributes to various women’s rhetorical work. For example, Smith uses varied and hybrid genres, such as literature (*Strange*), polemical autobiography (*Killers*), and personal essay/social history/handbook (*Now*) to foster collective understandings of and transformations toward social justice and democracy, clearly neither traditional rhetorical genres nor normative goals of public deliberation. Additionally, Smith addressed taboo topics, such as miscegenation, interracial love, same-sex sex, and the dignity and needs of the disabled, all topics unheard of in traditional male canons.

Moreover, Smith employs a variety of rhetorical *technai* to transform her readers’ knowledge and their actions (Flower, Long and Flower). In this sense, Smith’s writings back Royster’s theory of literacy as “sociopolitical action” by instructing her readers “in ways of believing and ways of doing” (Royster 112). Smith’s intended audience was predominately white

and privileged since African Americans did not need to be persuaded of the injustice and arbitrariness of Jim Crow, and, among a variety of rhetorical strategies, Smith employs historical analysis and performs a feminist historiography In *Killers of the Dream* and *Now Is the Time* by re-visioning commonly-held Jim Crow history to remind her readership that legal and social segregation was a social construction supporting white economic and social interests. Richard Terdiman points out some of the challenges of accurate historical representation, theorizing that “what we call the past is always already and irretrievably a profoundly altered or attenuated version of the contents that were potentially available to consciousness when the past was present” (qtd in Ricker 7). Yet Smith *was* present during much of the past that she explicates, and her analysis of that time illustrates the power of normative social structures work to create values that exclude certain subjects.

Smith frequently examines this relationship between invention and memory. For instance, In *Now is the Time*, Smith begins with a history of the purposeful rhetorical construction of segregation in the United States during Reconstruction and “the hard done by the walls that were put up in minds” (45). Smith situates racial segregation as initially an emergency safe-keeping mechanism, “put up hastily, and in different ways, to ease panic” (40) and which, “[l]ooked at as an emergency measure” whose “temporary use” “was an act of plain common sense” devoid of “cruelty” or “desire to shame or humiliate anyone” (41). However, Smith explains, “the race issue” became a tool of politicians and others who realized that “segregation was beginning to pay profits—economic, political, psychological—not only in Dixie but throughout the United States” (45). Ultimately, Smith explains, segregation became reified and lawful, and “white people did not want to solve it. We did not want to because it profited the few in money and power, and all white people in prestige (36). Smith, here, illustrates the collective act of forgetting, what Plato in the *Symposium* claims calls recollection: “When we use the word

recollection we imply that knowledge departs from us; forgetting is the departure of knowledge, and recollection, by implanting a new impression in the place of that which is lost, preserves it, and gives it a spurious appearance of uninterrupted identity” (208a-b). Both Plato and Smith, here, not only address the power of history writing as rhetorical (Jarratt) but also as that which that which provides points of disarticulation.

In addition to feminist historiography, which brings in marginalized voices and non-hegemonic discourses, Smith also employs anaphora and antithesis frequently to bring to life the complexity and intersectionality of various oppressions:

From the day I was born, I began to learn my lessons...I learned it is possible to be a Christian and a white southerner simultaneously; to be a gentlewoman and an arrogant callous creature in the same moment; to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable in doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word *democracy* was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one’s mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality. (*Killers* 29)

In this excerpt, Smith’s use of the narrative techniques of anaphora (repetition in successive clauses) and antithesis (juxtaposition of opposing ideas) is reminiscent of Royster’s description of the “self-in-the-world” essay writing attributed to African American women writers. At this point I don’t know when, how, or where Smith learned of such techniques. Clearly, however, she frequently enacts a narrative form of consubstantiality that acknowledges the “asymmetrical reciprocity of human communication (“Asymmetrical” Young 50-51). Despite the possibility of shared experiences and understandings, Young stresses the impossibility of adopting someone else’s precise perspective since “[e]ach subject position has its own history, which transcends the

copresence of subjects in communication” (“Asymmetrical” 51). Hence the need to adopt an understanding of difference in tandem with an understanding of sameness. Unfortunately, most contemporary constitutional democracies are underwritten only by the ideal of sameness, an ideal that often fractures upon contact with individuals’ concurrent epistemic hierarchical conditioning. The concept of natural rights thus constitutes a fault line in public sphere theory and praxis, not because the concept of natural rights in and of itself is flawed, but because, as I shall argue, discourses and consequent practices of inequality trump the discourse of natural rights.

Natural Rights and the Public Sphere

The corpus of first-wave feminist writings demonstrates that the democratic agenda of many first-wave feminists insightfully acknowledged the might of ideology, that is, the power of communal belief to create both partisanship and its companion, discrimination (Campbell). In their conscious attempts to combat the ideological production of bias that essentially excluded them from the public sphere, these women strove to abolish any opposition to the precept of equality under the law by consistently adhering to a shared minimal definition of humanity that defines an individual *outside subjecthood* as the standard of interpellation.

During a National Woman’s Rights Convention debate in 1860, Elizabeth Cady Stanton eloquently explains why such a minimal definition is needed: “The best interests of a community never can require the sacrifice of one innocent being—of one sacred right. In the settlement, then, of any question, we must simply consider the highest good of the individual. It is the inalienable right of all to be happy” (“National” 192).

In “Is it a Crime for a U.S. Citizen to Vote?” Susan B. Anthony explicates this view of “equal rights to all,” declaring that “kings, priests, popes, aristocrats, were all alike dethroned, and placed on a common level, politically, with the lowliest born subject or serf” (282). In

addition, Anthony elucidates the repercussions of such leveling, claiming that “by the practice of such declarations all class and caste distinction will be abolished; and slave, serf, plebian, wife, woman, all alike, bound from their *subject position* to the proud platform of equality” (italics added 282). Anthony impressively invokes postmodern notions of positionality and multiple subjectivities nearly a century and a half ago even while arguing for their suspension within the public sphere.

Both Stanton and Anthony invoke the conceptual foundations of universal human rights that conceptually underwrite the United States Constitution and, later, The Universal Bill of Human Rights (U.N), establishing each human life with rights to dignity and self-determination.

Although the democratic ideal of universal parity still operates as an American commonplace, recent public sphere work, however, demonstrates its mythic qualities (West, Fraser, Young). Both the law and the concept of a singular unified public sphere have been challenged as means to establish universal rights largely because social, cultural, and economic stratification prohibits many individuals’ and groups’ access to and participation in the public sphere, let alone their ability to “be heard” seriously enough to influence the trajectory of public discourse (Fraser, Young). Nancy Fraser critiques Habermas’s concept of a singular bourgeois public sphere accessible to all for these and other reasons. For one, Fraser points out that counterpublics have always existed in competition with this idealized singular public sphere. For example, first-wave feminists’ eighty year plus fight for suffrage and other material rights refutes the notion of a singular public sphere. Fraser critiques the Habermasian ideal of a uniform public sphere, claiming that it functions as a masculinist normative ideal that “legitimate[s] an emergent form of class rule” (116), determining who gets heard and who doesn’t. Fraser clearly demonstrates that inclusion can not take place as long as the concept of universal subjecthood rests upon the idea that social stratification can be bracketed. Bracketing assumes that “a public

sphere is or can be a space of zero degree culture” (120) —impossible in stratified, and even egalitarian multicultural societies Fraser claims: “liberal political theory assumes” that democracy can take place in isolation from “socioeconomic and sociosexual structures that generate systemic inequalities” (121), and she advocates “a widening of discursive contestation” (124) as a means to increase parity since systems of law are not decontextualized systems that can alone create parity.

The Emergence of Postmodern Difference

Awareness of inequity, multiculturalism, and the hegemony of normative ideals have become commonplace discussions in the sciences (Fausto-Sterling, Weisstein) and humanities since poststructural critiques surfaced on many fronts, including, but by no means limited to, second-wave and global feminisms (Weisstein Burris, Harding, Bhavnani) and language philosophy (Le Fevre, Derrida). Now, few, and perhaps no fields, are excluded from such discussions, from biological to historical research, with each critique aimed at expanding epistemological awareness of the social world and its structural relationships that rhetorically and materially construct difference, exclusion, and, what Judith Butler terms, “intelligibility”—that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (3). Lillian Smith’s life and published works, however, trouble such a timeline. Born in 1897, Smith is remembered as civil rights activist whose published writings focus on race relations. Though her writings clearly do, such remembering renders Smiths work one-dimensional, as focused on race. Examination of her work, however, reveals sophisticated discussions of, among other things, the rhetorical construction of the communal and its relationship to the individual that predate what is commonly considered the emergence of “the postmodern critique” of modernist epistemologies of language. For example, in her 1944 novel *Strange Fruit*, about an interracial love affair circa 1920 that takes place in the repressive regime of Southern Supremacy and

segregation, Smith's Black female protagonist declares that "'Race is something—made up, to me. Not real. I don't have to believe in it. Social position—ambition—seem made up too'" (95). Via such social commentary, Smith challenges her readers to consider the social-construction of both race and class as human inventions. Indeed, both Smith's fiction and nonfiction reveal particular ideologies inscribed within systems, particularly invidious ideologies that conceal the "sterile fetishism of the Old South" and its "vapidness, dishonesty, cruelty, stupidity" (qtd. in Gladney 24).

Yet Smith moves beyond social-construction to sophisticated notions of social-constructivism as evidenced in an introduction she wrote in 1966 to the autobiography *Ely*: "Perhaps as much as anything else Ely's story will remind us that there is a structural, bony sameness throughout the region that can be called accurately "the South"; but it is fleshed out in ten thousand different ways—ways often strikingly inconsistent with the "beliefs" that seem inherent in the structure (xvii). Smith concludes the introduction with an emphasis on "the play" that occurs within structures, displaying clearly postmodern notions of agency and rhetoric:

Much of Ely's life was totally unlike the old stereotypes that people in the past have written of, when thinking or talking about 'the South' or 'the Negro' or 'the poor white.' Perhaps one reason the book is so fascinating is that we feel nuances we have been unaware of; we guess at actions we had not dared think southerners were capable of; we learn that the differences between each of us are terribly important to cherish even though we value more and more our common humanity. (xx).

Much ahead of her time, then, Smith argues for the need to recognize difference—not equality—as a metaphysical precept of the human condition and as the ground for public sphere work:

So—I threw *equal* out of my vocabulary. I don't think it matters two cents who is equal to whom. No individual is equal to another individual. We cannot be. It is not in our

nature to be the same. All growing things are different—but men are obviously different; and become men because of their differences...

Thinking of these matters and the confusion so many feel, I have become convinced that *our right to be different* is, in a deep sense, the most precious right we human beings have, and the one most likely, if we hold to it, to ensure the human race a future. We need to treasure human differences where they are important (I can't see that skin color is more important than eye color); we need to cherish the unique achievements of various groups, to protect the unique talents of individuals, to value the various beliefs and ideas and abilities that seem to grow more easily in one culture than in another. We may need them all for our survival—certainly we shall need some of them one of these days, and we don't know which we shall need the most or where they come to birth. ("Words" 151-4)

Smith, here, advocates an understanding of and respect for otherness that predates contemporary work on mutual respect. Although Smith can by no means be considered a postmodernist since modernist assumptions often emerge in her writings, her works adumbrate current feminist philosophizing on the politics of difference. Perhaps most importantly, Smith's favorite refrain—that humans need to learn how to *relate* to each other—stuck with me, pointing me in a fruitful direction for expanding our understandings of why the accommodation of difference remains so problematic. Benefited by contemporary scholarship on difference (to which Smith had no access during her lifetime), I take up Smith's charge to understand why humans have such difficulty relating to each other, particularly their difficulty in recognizing sameness in the face of difference. Part of this dissertation project exposes a foundational flaw underlying the ways in which people are socialized to interact with each other, a flaw that impedes human potential for respectful engagement. Because respectful engagement requires that respect for oneself and for the other are of equally paramount importance, the absence—or

diminishment—of either prohibits respectful engagement, producing a less-than-mutual engagement.

Feminist Ethics and Interpersonal Recognition Self-respect

Although “Feminist ethics comprises a complex and theoretically *disunified* body of work (“Introduction” Calhoun 8), Julia T. Woods succinctly explains that “being ethical” means being “inclusive of a range of voices and experiences and perspectives” (qtd. in Arneson 118). Inclusivity demands that individuals and groups respect themselves and each other, and the qualities of self-respect and respect for others underscore moral exchange.

Termed “interpersonal recognition self-respect,” Robin Dillon explains that the recognition of each individual’s fundamental worth as an end in itself is intrinsic to moral engagement (201) and is a moral duty. In “Kant on Arrogance and Self-Respect,” Dillon explicates Kant’s view of moral duties, claiming that “Interestingly, what Kant emphasizes in discussing the duties of respect for others is not actions we must or must not perform but *attitude*” (italics added 194), which, Dillon explains, understands that “The duty of respect is a negative one ‘of not exalting oneself above others’” (194). “The duty to respect others thus includes,” Dillon adds, “the duty to refrain from anything that would threaten another person’s right and duty to respect themselves” (194).

A hierarchical system of difference, however, intrinsically denies a system of exchange based upon interpersonal recognition self-respect. Positions outside the norm are stigmatized and threaten individuals’ right to respect themselves. Positions occupying the norm which posit the norm as superior to that outside it, Dillon brilliantly demonstrates, contradict the essence of dignity which is a “noncomparative, nonscalar form of worth” since “all persons have it equally and absolutely.”

Iris Marion Young and the Politics of Difference

Similarly, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* Iris Marion Young argues that if we are to reconfigure our society to be more socially-just, the definition of difference itself must first be reconfigured. Difference in Western epistemology, she explains, is generally perceived as deviation from a norm “in which one group occupies the position of a norm, against which all others are measured” (169), an act that always valorizes and universalizes the norm by defining as “different” whatever sits outside the norm. “In this way the definition of difference as exclusion and opposition,” Young argues, actually “denies difference” (170) by setting the norm as an assimilatory ideal. Moreover, Young asserts, “The marking of difference always implies a good/bad opposition; it is always a devaluation, the naming of an inferiority in relation to a superior standard of humanity” (170). She advocates replacing this false dichotomizing with an “egalitarian politics of difference” in which all groups are generally recognized as “similar in some respects” and that whatever differences emerge exist relationally, as variation, not hierarchically within fixed categories that essentialize identity and that conceptually organize the worth of a subject.

At issue, Young notes, is human disposition—since an individual’s hierarchical orientation “wells from the depths of the Western subject’s sense of identity” (170). Her use of “Western” as a descriptor highlights Young’s poststructural orientation to identity by distinguishing one group-specific subjectivity from other possibilities, as well as the sense that other orientations are possible. Nevertheless, “very process of rank ordering knowledge carries gender implications” (Jarratt 64) that underwrite the Western metaphysical tradition. Drawing upon the legacies of Aristotle and Plato “kinds” of persons, meaning groups, “occup[y] the position of a norm, against which all others are measured” (*Politics*, Young 170). Since the norm remains “unmarked” and all positions outside the norm “marked,” subject positions outside the

norm are stigmatized and “marked with an essence imprisoned in a given set of possibilities” (170).

The Western subject’s sense of identity has been historically traced and forcefully challenged by feminist and poststructuralist thought which have exploded the notions of fixed texts—and, consequently, fixed identities (also texts). As texts, identities have permeable and changeable boundaries. In *A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction*, which begins by summarizing Jacques Derrida’s contributions to poststructuralist theorizing of the relationship between language and consciousness, Sharon Crowley traces the privilege afforded to identity back to Aristotle:

Aristotelian logic is based on two concepts directly borrowed from the grammar of simple sentences—categories and predicables, classes of things and the possible relations between them. The basic assumption of this logic—the law of identity and contradiction—posits that either a thing is or it is not. Of course this law presumed presence, and the entire logical system awarded privilege to identity, rather than to contradiction. (3)

The paradoxical nature of “truths”—that they can contain “both and” as in *both* contradiction *and* identity—has been advanced in poststructural discussions of language (Young, Butler, Derrida *Limited*).

Nevertheless, Western orientations to knowledge do not grant the same weight to both; contradiction and identity are not co-valent. Identity is privileged over contradiction and thus constitutes a “terministic screen” (Burke), a mode of perceiving the world that shapes and constrains the way meaning is made. Clearly we have discourses that run counter to a hierarchical ordering of subjects, such as discourses of compassion, cooperation, and respect, and we will always have competing discourses because *dissoi logoi* is a condition of rhetoric as an art

of invention (Crowley). Hierarchical ordering, however, works as a cultural episteme, a field in which such counter discourses cannot flourish.

Hence the value of using the term “disposition” for this project. “Disposition” is the Latinate term for the second canon of invention (Jarratt) and refers to arrangement. If we consider humans as embodied texts of multiple discourses and rhetoric not only as the study of the known and knowable but also the study of the knower, then humans are subject to arrangement, in this case, a hierarchical ordering that shapes the ways in which they interact with others. Intersubjectivity, then, is a social construct and is thus available for epistemic reframing.

To accomplish such a task, we need to understand the nuances and consequences of an epistemic frame based on normative privileging. Until now, this prospectus has highlighted the logic of privilege and alluded to the notion of discrimination, but the consequences of privilege affect our daily habits and practices in a variety of invidious ways.

Towards an Epistemology of Privilege

Most scholarship on difference casts privilege as an advantage, as “something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (qtd. in Johnson 21). Smith also uses privilege in this context as the following excerpt about the value and advantage of “whiteness” illustrates:

To be ‘superior,’ to be the ‘best’ people on earth’ with the best ‘system’ of making a living because your sallow skin was white and you were ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ made you forget that you were eaten up with malaria and hookworm; made you forget that you lived in a shanty and ate pot-likker and corn bread, and worked long hours for nothing. Nobody could take away from you this whiteness that made you and your way of life ‘superior.’ They could steal your wages, keep you from acquiring knowledge; they could tax your vote or cheat you out of it; they could by arousing your anxieties make you impotent; but

they could not strip your white skin off of you. It became the poor white's most precious possession, a 'charm' staving off utter dissolution. And in devious, perverse ways it helped maintain his sanity in an insane world, compensating him—as did his church's promise of haven—for so many spiritual bruises and material deprivations. (478-9).

In this excerpt, we see privilege operating as it usually does, as a “possession.” (just read someone who speaks to this but can't remember at the moment).

Yet privilege operates in many other embodied ways. Smith brings the imbrication and internalization of regulatory regimes into sharp relief. Referencing her autobiographical work, *Killers of the Dream*, Watson discusses Smith's understanding of bodily learning, how, according to Smith, “whites ‘learned our way of life by doing.’” (qted. in Watson 478):

What white Southerner of my generation ever stops to think consciously where to go or asks himself if it is right for him to go there! His muscles know where he can go and take him to the front of the streetcar, to the front of the bus, to the big school, to the hospital, to the library, to hotel and restaurant and picture show, into the best that his town has to offer its citizens. These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands and become difficult to tear out.” (478)

Such embodied arrogance generates the abject and behaviors toward the abject (see Young *Politics*).

Indeed, this project will outline an epistemology of privilege and will address a variety of interrelated modalities produced by hierarchical dispositioning, such as shame, arrogance, privilege, fear, and denial, all of which work in unison to perpetuate globally a negative affectual cycle.. Such a study embarks on elaborating our understanding of our hierarchical conditioning, but the primary value of such an endeavor comes in understanding privilege as a constraining

position—not as a value added, an advantage. Smith understood the damaging aspects of privilege—an area of study undertheorized. Despite Young’s admirable work on the connections between the perception of difference, oppression, conformity, and self- and other- regard, her discussions of privilege tend to overlook the ways in which privilege constrains subjectivity. Of privilege, she writes, “Whereas the privileged groups are neutral and exhibit free and malleable subjectivity, the excluded groups are marked with an essence imprisoned in a given set of possibilities” (170). Of course, no subjectivity is “freely” malleable, for such a conviction denies the social nature of knowledge and subjectivity.

For example, within a hierarchical system of difference, since neither the shamed nor the shamer can garner both self-respect and respect from the other, both subject positions are constrained, albeit in different ways. Clearly, neither position experiences mutual recognition and respect. Therefore, shaming of others induced by arrogance foreshortens the shamer’s subjective (and intersubjective) options by prohibiting interpersonal recognition self-respect, thereby challenging the notion that those who occupy normative positions are unrestrained by their own subjection.

In addition, normative positions that essentialize difference, Young asserts, “*express a fear of specificity, and a fear of making permeable the categorical border between oneself and the others*” (italics added 170). Whether instinctual or not, fear of others is cultivated by hierarchical dispositioning, not merely xenophobically as in group-identification but also with respect to specificity (i.e., individuality). A non-hierarchical orientation to difference should, Young contends, name “relations of similarity and dissimilarity that can be reduced to neither coextensive identity nor nonoverlapping otherness” (171). Non-hierarchical dispositioning, for instance, might likely result in attraction to and pleasure in exposure to differences as novel and

thus stimulating, and while adults still evidence this pleasure at times, we see such dispositioning more frequently in children whose dispositions are not yet solidified.

Normative positions, however, are perhaps most damaging in that they produce a false sense of homogeneity—for example, the commonplace of a meritocratic playing field in American discourse. In “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” Charles Mills provides an example that helps explain the ways in which nonideal conditions, such as inequity and injustice, are justified: “So racism and sexism are framed as ‘anomalies’ to a political culture conceived of as—despite everything—basically egalitarian” (179). If merely anomalous, there is no serious cause for alarm (unless, of course, one is on the receiving end of the “-ism”). Identification with and internalization of symbols often function thusly to distort and confuse, and such ideology represents, according to Mills, “a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population” (170). A hierarchical orientation to difference thus has a dampening effect on perceptual alternatives, demanding us to re-think about ourselves collectively as a group in ways that might seem to defy political sphere arguments against a shared “we” (Fraser, Young). However, current global circumstances, from economic instability to climate change, demand we address this Western identity orientation, this hierarchical disposition whose dominance suggests a collective subjectivity—a shared “we—and whose dominance manufactures collective denial of privileged collusion in the creation of discord and suffering.

Ironically, however, this postmodern turn has overlooked a “nonideal” (Mills) aspect of culture to which everyone is subject—a violent brutal world. All of us live in a world where suffering and oppression are common material realities, accepted by many as inevitable. There is then, arguably, a subjective “we.” Despite our group-specific differences, as members of a world and as receivers of its representations, few individuals (if any) know what it is like to “not know”

a discourse of discord in which war, strife, rape, torture, subjugation, fear, shame, contempt, arrogance, racism, sexism, classism, humiliation, and degradation circulate, whether or not these items regularly occupy our conscious thoughts and whether or not we have directly experienced them. I do not mean to trivialize or deny here the lived experiences of those who have directly experienced horror and have had the psychological and sociological stability of their lives and livelihoods wrenched from them by any number of brutal practices, as is the case for those civilians who have, say, survived a military attack that destroys their home and maims and/or kills their family members, or, for example, those individuals who have endured various physical and psychological abuses that reduce their capacities for developing basal security and the ability to trust others. Rather, I wish to draw attention to a privileged position—a Western disposition—that valorizes ideals of freedom, individualism, and “happiness” but that is imbued with a colonial and hierarchical orientation to difference underwritten by a sense of entitlement that enables it to achieve its self-interested ends at the expense of Others.

Thus, each of us who occupies positions of privilege (or has internalized norms of privilege) is forced to learn in varying degrees to accept and become inured to suffering and oppression to such an extent as enables us to “function,” a term loosely used here. Such “acceptance” does not necessarily indicate an intellectual acceptance of the status quo, but it does suggest that a significant part of our maturation process involves developing affective ways to filter out and make sense of an arbitrarily brutal world. Analysis of such affective conditioning is the aim of this project.

Conclusion

It is vital then that Smith’s work should not be destined for the historical amnesia so frequently imposed upon feminists who speak up vigorously for a better world and a better world vision. The importance of historical memory should not be underestimated as a *techne* in and of

itself—a rhetorical mechanism advocated by many, from Isocrates in *Antidosis* to Holocaust survivors whose motto is “Never forget.”

Smith clearly understood the importance of memory:

She writes, “I have been curiously smothered during the past nine years; indeed, ever since *Killers of the Dream*. When writers about ‘race’ are discussed, I am never mentioned; when southern writers are discussed, I am never mentioned; when women writers are mentioned, I am not among them; when best-sellers are discussed, *Strange Fruit* (which broke every record for a serious book) is never mentioned. This is a curious amnesia; I have smiled at it, have laughed at it; but I know what it has done to me in sales and in prestige.

This is frank talk. Do not, I beg you, be embarrassed by it. I can still laugh it off most of the time; but now and then, I truly wonder. Whom, among the mighty, have I so greatly offended!

The repression of Smith’s work and her memory may indeed be considered a great honor to the work she did, for it provides testimony to the discursive pressure her words had upon the demagogues and their systems of oppressions about which she so frequently speaks. She understood the power of collective action, often working metacognitively to transform people’s understanding of issues in order to persuade them to change their daily practices. If discursive collective action has the power and potential that public sphere theorists claim, then I think it a highly worthwhile and fruitful endeavor to bring Lillian Smith back into that public sphere. Smith’s popularity as a public speaker attests to the collective desire of those who are less powerful to bring about a more just (but not “equal”) world, and reviving her work honors both her and the long feminist tradition in which she took part.

Tentative Research Questions

1. How does an “epistemology of privilege” underwrite the ways that humans are dispositioned to interact with each other, and how does such dispositioning rhetorically inform humanities scholarship with respect to individual and group dispositioning to “difference”?
2. How does hierarchical dispositioning, which is socially-constructed and which conceptually underwrites privilege, maintain a collective affect (see affect studies) that suppresses invention and the actualization of human freedom?

Methodology

Much of this study has begun with the reading of Smith’s primary works though I have not as yet completed reading the many journal articles, columns, and letters that she wrote. Two collections of Smith’s work published posthumously, a collection of letters edited by Margaret Rose Gladney and an anthology of excerpts from various non-fiction essays and speeches edited by Michelle Cliff, also belong in this corpus.

A significant portion of this project is theoretical, requiring me to continue reading scholarship in the fields of rhetoric, public sphere, and moral psychology. Of course, some of this work is hermeneutic in that I’ll be theorizing Smith’s primary works.

My historical knowledge of the Civil Rights movement, the South, and generally of the time period is weak. To address this weakness, I plan to read assorted histories as well as periodicals from the time period, particularly Georgian newspapers and *The Saturday Review*, in which Smith published a few times.

Timeline

June 2010:	Chapters 1 and 2, Introduction and Literature Review
September 2010:	Chapter 3, Causes of and Modalities Associated with Privilege
December 2010:	Chapter 4, Paradigm Shifts, Narcissism and Desire
February 2011:	Chapter 5 and Epilogue, Implications and Applications

March 2011: Dissertation completion (leeway)
April 2011: Dissertation defense

Potential Contributions

Few scholars have examined how intersubjectivity itself is also a social-construct that predisposes people to interact with others in specific ways, in ways that frequently traverse most group-specific differences. Lillian Smith's works originally directed my attention to such matters, and I have since discovered theories from a variety of disciplines that, when linked, provide a new lens for discussing mutual respect and democratic engagement.

For rhetorical studies, this project offers substantially new ways for talking about the relationship between intervention and invention, particularly with respect to the ways in which humans are socialized to their intersubjective relationships and to the intersubjective realm itself. In addition, this work reinvigorates Smith's intellectual contributions, specifically how her attention to the concept of privilege expands current rhetorical scholarship. As such it serves feminist historiography within rhetorical studies whose currency and importance is understood by practitioners.

Transdisciplinarily, my project promises much, particularly in the ways in which it provides an epistemological lens that examines the ethics of interpersonal and intrapersonal engagement. In this fashion, my dissertation project traverses disciplines. Perhaps most importantly this project forwards a theory of privilege that does not link privilege to specific identities (e.g., white privilege) and thus provides a more fluid and usable frame for discussions of privilege, ethics, and democratic engagement than currently exists.

Limitations

Although I will advance an epistemology of privilege, I'm sure that the results will be incomplete, and I hope that others will continue the project.

In addition, although this project will analyze the concept of privilege and elaborate a nexus of modalities of behavior and their affects associated with privilege, protracted discussion of specific ways to effectively counteract such deeply-learned dispositioning is beyond the scope of this project.

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