

**COMMENTARY ON
CATHERINE PARSONS SMITH'S "WILLIAM GRANT STILL"¹
Published by the University of Illinois Press**

by Judith Anne Still

In much of the 20th century, people of Color labored to survive morally and substantively in spite of "White privilege," an unspoken license of which most 21st century Whites are unaware, or are not about to acknowledge. According to this license, slander or libel against minorities was allowable and believable, even in academic circles. Falsehoods about Colored sexuality, violence, bitterness, alcoholism, drug addiction, cowardice and ignorance, such as in D. W. Griffith's film "Birth of a Nation," were not uncommon. It appears to me that Catherine Parsons Smith, in all of her writings about William Grant Still and Verna Arvey, operates as if this license still exist, for her books and papers about the couple contain so many false and defamatory allegations, that one wonders where her editors were with a cautionary and staying-hand prior to publication.

I must point out here, before delineating the problems with Smith's texts, that Catherine Smith's knowledge of Still and Arvey on a personal level amounted to a mere hour or two during which she met my mother in her home and discussed things with her that were of little importance. Subsequent to the brief discussion, Smith interviewed a few people who knew little about the Stills personally, or who disliked one or the other of the two of them for reasons of ethnic or professional bias. Smith avoided interviewing intimate friends of the Stills, even when she met two of them. There were no in-depth investigations with Miriam Matthews, Ellen Wright, Sheila and Ted Phillips, Marjorie Lange, Alfred and Marie Smith, and others. When she came to my home, I gave her access to the diaries, journals, letters and all documents relative to my parents, but she did not use most of them in her research. The result is that she herself felt qualified to decide who the Stills were, or were not, according to some mythology to which she subscribed. A mutual friend of ours told her that she was terribly wrong about the Stills, but she ignored him, even though he knew the couple well.

There are any number of untruths in Smith's biography of William Grant Still published by the University of Illinois Press (2008), but the ensuing commentary on certain glaring aspects of the volume will suffice to unfold the difficulties that the author creates through her poor scholarship and personal agenda. The satisfying part of reviewing this book is that the actual facts are there for all to see in the Still-Arvey collection at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and in collections elsewhere in the country. The public is urged to look at the primary sources, and we at William Grant Still Music will assist by continuing to publish the diaries, private letters and private journals which are not currently in print. The lives of the Stills were probably the most minutely-documented in the history of the arts, and it is a saving grace that the archives exist, to call to account biographers who have an agenda before they begin their investigations. It is from the primary sources, abjured by Smith, that my commentary takes its justification.

¹ Copyright by Judith Anne Still.

DEVALUING THE PRICELESS

The suspicion that Catherine Smith wanted to demean William Grant Still came to me in 1998, when she fought to program a Florence Price symphony as the keynote work at a conference honoring Still, instead of Still's relatively neglected Symphony #5, or some other significant, but little known, Still work. The upshot of the programming, among the untutored, was the notion that Still did not have a major work good enough to be the keynote.

The ulterior workings of the bigoted mind operate similarly. To suggest that persons of Color are incompetent, a Black is hired for a job for which he has no credentials. If an African-American "Miss America" is required, a woman is chosen who has some nude photographs in her past. If an award for music or literature is to be given, an awardee is selected who is not at the top of the field, and who writes compositions that are not audience-friendly. This is, in fact, how Smith works in her biography. She degrades the music of William Grant Still by lauding the inferior work "Africa" as the composer's masterpiece, instead of a timeless piece such as the "Suite for Violin and Orchestra." Furthermore, she talks endlessly about trivial events from the composer's teenage years, pretends that a mediocre Black composer inspired him, and spends time "proving" that the bigotry that the great man encountered in his career was somehow his fault, or his wife's fault. Above all, Smith gives inadequate attention to the man's work in early radio, the premiere of one of his operas on television, the honors that he received from universities, major symphony orchestras and West Point, the keys that he received to the State of Mississippi, his visit to the White House, and the other significant "firsts" in his career. The space that should have been occupied by substantive achievements is taken up with assertions that the composer, faced with opposition to his efforts, couldn't "cope."

In addition to her claim that "Africa" is a "splendid" piece of music, Smith hones in on the composer's reputation, in damning by faint praise his ability as a performer. Without any eyewitness testimony from creditable observers, she glosses over his performances, as if she herself had heard him play. What she does not acknowledge is that, in the 1920's in New York, Still would not have been hired to play in Harlem or in the White clubs outside of Harlem, had he not been superb. There were so many out-of-work musicians competing for jobs in the decade that only the finest performers were employed. W. C. Handy, in interviews and other writings, made it clear that his musicians had to play better than any of the White boys in order for Handy to get gigs for them in the South. Handy himself wrote about Still's incredible expertise as a soloist.

Add to Still's expertise as a performer his flair for conducting, and one has, in him, a consummate man of music. Frank Sharp, who played on the Deep River Hour in New York, told me that the orchestra members begged the director to let Still conduct, because he was better at it than anyone else who was available. Still would not have been invited to conduct at the Hollywood Bowl more than once had he not have been an exemplary music director. Newspaper reporters praised the composer for his impressive command of the stage.

CHANGING THE FACTS TO FIT THE LIE

Perhaps the most egregious of Catherine Smith's resorts to falsehood, appear when she changes or ignores dates to prove her points. She suggests in her book that Still's "race music," by which she probably means crossover music, was inspired by Gershwin, or by Bruce Forsythe. Ignoring the much earlier work of Harry Burleigh with Dvorak, we can point to Still's "Black Bottom," "Three Negro Songs" and "Spirituals: A Medley," all of which appeared in 1921 and 1922, before Gershwin's second-string popular effort in 1924. In order to preserve the fiction that Gershwin was the pioneer, Smith also fails to mention Eubie Blake's assertion that 'good old George' took the theme for "I Got Rhythm" from Still in 1922 (see the *Black Perspective in Music*, and Verna Arvey's "Afro-American Music Memo" in *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures*). Wayne Shirley, formerly of the Library of Congress, told me that Gershwin took a segment of Porgy out of Still's "Levee Land."

Aside from the obfuscation of Still's pioneering use of racial idioms in orchestral works, Smith also tries to cast aspersions on his morals. When she talks about his marriage to his first wife and the birth of his first son, she does not give exact dates, and she hints that Grace may have been pregnant when they married. She makes this inference, in spite of having seen the date of the marriage in the files, October 4, 1915, and the date of the birth, which was in November of 1916. Obviously she wants the sexual aspect of Still's life, if there had been a relevant sexual aspect, to take precedence over his creative output.

In other places, Smith changes the documented facts without justification, substantiation or proof. To endorse the idea that Still foolishly lost his job at Columbia Studios by putting a musical joke into the score for "Lost Horizon," Smith ignores statements that Still knew that his contract was not to be renewed, and that he played the joke as a humorous farewell. Still was never a stupid, reckless man, although Smith wants us to believe that he was, and his letters and personal writings show that he was hardly one to throw away opportunities fecklessly.

In instances where Still wrote newspaper articles and diary entries to explain his racial philosophy, as with his resignation from the movie, "Stormy Weather," Smith suggests that it was not Still, but Verna Arvey, who spoke for him. Her documentation for the accusation is nowhere to be found, lost along with her credibility. Whenever the composer makes a statement that conflicts with her brand of liberalism, she asserts that he was negatively influenced, as if he could have been someone malleable, indecisive, self-destructive, and not very intelligent. Happily, Still's personal writings, penned before he met Verna Arvey, prove otherwise.

A NEW-LOW IN THE SEARCH FOR INSIGNIFICANCE

Regrettably, Catherine Smith spends several pages conjecturing about an incident that involved Still when he was in college at Wilberforce. It appears that he was pushed off the sidewalk because he was walking with a certain girl, and that he threatened his attacker with a knife. Smith spends more time on this

occurrence than she does on Still's first symphony, and on his important first lecture at the Eastman School of Music. Could it be, in Smith's view, that the bit of juvenalia outweighs the "Afro-American Symphony" in significance for American music?

The good news is that we have letters from Still's classmates in Ohio, and an autobiographical document written by Still, that shed an entirely different light on the Wilberforce years. The classmates talk about Still's obsession with music, about his use of his meager funds to buy music scores, and about the concert of his works at Wilberforce which Catherine Smith believes did not take place, even though the program from the concert was there for Catherine to see when she visited the Wilberforce archives. Gladys Barton Parker recalled the latter concert 40 years after the fact, describing the composer "on Galloway Hall stage, presenting one of your beautiful compositions."

None of the college grads mentioned the knife fight that Smith thinks is so pivotal, and the young man who was supposed to have pushed Still also wrote an innocuous letter to Still that gave no indication of any ill-will or of past altercations. Since Smith does not give a date for the alleged fight, it may have taken place when the composer was a freshman or a sophomore, instead of close to graduation as Smith contends. Smith's habit of leaving out dates when those dates belie her fabrications, leads one to be suspicious about the actual impact of the incident on an illustrious career.

On the other hand, Smith tries to make a case for Still's having been so mortified by the fight, and about leaving school later on, that he wrote the "Blues" to express his emotional upheaval. She presents no documents to justify this conclusion, and, as if to contradict her, Still talked in his oral history about his interest in the Blues. It was well-known that W. C. Handy led him to orchestrate Blues pieces soon after he left college. Moreover, Still's writings about his experiences at Wilberforce are so personal, and so honest, that there is no possibility that he had feelings of sadness that he failed to express.

In the proximity of the "knife-fight," which was not earth-shaking or even life-changing, Smith also tries to make a case for Still's having been overly interested in sex when he was in college. She digs up (out of context) a reference to the avoidance of "fleshly appetites" in his prayer diary, and tries to turn that into a confession. None of Still's friends say that Still drank, or that he was more concerned about sex than other young men of his age. Something of a prankster in college, he was also a fanatic about music, and a kind, much-admired young man whose talent was recognized early on by professors and fellow-students.

Furthermore, according to Still's classmates, Still had not dated his first wife, Grace Bundy, while at Wilberforce, and they were surprised when he married her. The testimony in his divorce file substantiates Still's claim to his immediate family that Grace engineered two unfortunate incidents at Wilberforce, including the unsanctioned co-ed picnic that forced Still to leave school. The divorce documents are critical to the understanding of Still's problems with

Grace, but, of course, Catherine Smith ignores the sworn testimony in order to create an image of moral turpitude where the composer was concerned.

The sad thing about Smith's treatment of Still's early years is that she does not talk about the spiritual and emotional events in his career; i.e. his witness to a lynching, his spiritual experiences and angelic visitation, and his pact with the Creator to work against racial prejudice for the rest of his days. Her only reference to the composer's spiritual devotion occurs when she declares that Still became interested in spiritualism when the occult was all the craze after the 1920's. She intimates that Still wanted to identify himself with the White community by following White society into the occult. What she does not know, and fails to recognize, is that Still had psychic visions as a child, and all through his life, and that the Black community in Harlem has had soothsayers and prophesying preachers since the 19th century. White people were late-comers to spiritualism in the aggregate, and Still and his forebears would have been the last people on earth to alter their interests to suit The Establishment. When future scholars read Still's book of "Prayer, Praise and Testimony," which we will publish later on, they will wonder how Smith came up with her bizarre prognostications.

STILL'S NON-"NO-FAULT" DIVORCE

Inasmuch as Catherine Smith does not mention Still's private account of his years at Wilberforce, it should not be a shock that she ignores the composer's sworn testimony about his divorce. She pretends that the fault in the break-up is not fully understood, and hints that Still's long hours away from home and possible extramarital affairs could have been the cause. Forgetting her own mention of the words of Carlton Moss, that Still was totally immersed in his music in Harlem, she wants readers to believe that Still could have been a cheating husband. As usual, she has no evidence for her speculations, nor does she allow the composer to defend himself in print. Smith does not repeat statements about Grace Bundy's illicit affairs and profligate behavior. She passes over the words of academics who have studied the Harlem Renaissance and Still saying that the composer was "truly a family man" (Dr. Gayle Murchison, E-mail on 9/16/08). Smith, likewise, does not cite autobiographical diary entries showing that Still was a conscientious father and husband.

Uncomfortably for Smith, her refusal to admit the existence of documents that explain the divorce has forced her to find a reason for the fictitious absence of documentation. The reason she proposes is that Verna Arvey, or another member of Still's second family, destroyed the composer's diaries and photographs that covered the years between 1930 and 1936. Presumably the "lost" diaries contained some scandalous and embarrassing revelations about Still. The question of why Arvey should destroy this material is not addressed.

Smith's accusations about the diaries are misleading, since there is absolutely no evidence anywhere that the composer kept a diary between 1930 and 1936. The divorce testimony alludes to Grace's habit of absconding with her husband's letters, so that any private papers of his up until 1934 may have been taken by his wife. Since Still's writings are quite forthcoming about his marriage, and about Verna Arvey, there is no indication that diaries, if they existed, would be

damaging, or that Verna Arvey had a stake in destroying them. Furthermore, why isn't Catherine Smith wondering what happened to diaries written from 1922 to 1929?

My mother (Verna Arvey) told me that she urged my father to start keeping a diary again in 1936, to keep track of dates, names and places for the biography that she wanted to put together. She presumed that he had not kept a diary after 1930 because he was so busy after the sensational success of the "Afro-American Symphony." This explanation is quite plausible, given the success, also, of "Sahdji," and given the enormous amount of work that Still did before and after his move to Los Angeles in 1934.

Naturally, Smith discounts the plausible, in favor of the wildly speculative. She declares that Arvey's book, *In One Lifetime*, is "unreliable," but she does not say why it is not to be relied upon. What she does not know is that William Grant Still wrote much of the material for that book himself, because Arvey incorporated his autobiography in the final manuscript. We have the manuscript of this autobiography, and with it future scholars will be able to get to the bottom of Still's divorce, in spite of Catherine Smith.

THE LOVE TRIANGLE THAT WASN'T

Catherine Smith states that there was a love triangle involving Bruce Forsythe, William Grant Still and Verna Arvey. She cites a letter from Bruce to Verna that expresses his love for her, as if this expression is enough to create a triangle. She does not refer to the extensive entries in Arvey's journal and diaries about Forsythe, for any inclusion of this material would defeat her allegations of scandal.

Bruce Forsythe was an African-American composer-writer who was not any kind of giant talent, but he had high aspirations, and Verna Arvey decided to write about him for the newspaper when she was in her teens. He joined her social coterie from 1926 to 1934, until Arvey and her friends told him not to come around them anymore. Arvey's circle of acquaintances ultimately rejected Bruce because he was a troubled man, an alcoholic and, possibly, bipolar. Forsythe's own homosexual tendencies conflicted with his heterosexual inclinations, causing him much anxiety. Arvey was frequently asked to drive Forsythe and his male friends to the opera, to the movies, and to social gatherings, because she was one of the few young ladies in the community who had a car. Arvey's journal clearly states that Forsythe's drinking and his bad behavior when drunk made him unwelcome in her home, and in the homes of her friends, and in the Spring of 1934 they sent him packing. Arvey's descriptions of Forsythe's antics before 1934 clearly indicate that she was not, nor had she ever been, in love with Bruce.

Not only that, but also, William Grant Still was never a rival with Bruce for Arvey's friendship. Still arrived in Los Angeles in May of 1934, after Forsythe, whom he had met in New York, had become persona non grata. This is not to say that Bruce didn't try to set up a relationship with Still, perhaps for the purpose of getting back into league with Arvey. In my opinion, Bruce was jealous of Still, and that is

why he wrote falsely about him; Catherine Smith quotes Forsythe as saying that Still was "portly," "Linate," and that he liked the ladies. Photographs indicate that Still was not portly or "Linate." Arvey's journal reveals that Still liked to dance with ladies at gatherings, but that he was not a Latin lover. She and he did not live together before they were married.

Arvey's diary indicates that Bruce Forsythe was not in her life after the Spring of 1934, even though he sent letters to her expressing his affection. On one occasion he may have come to her house drunk, and Arvey may have called upon Still to deal with him; the diary entries are not clear about this. Still did try to discourage Forsythe from his bad behavior, for he wrote his piano composition, "Quit Dat Fool'nish," to convince Bruce of the need to stop drinking. The dedication of the piece to Bruce was changed later, so as not to embarrass him.

In spite of the evidence that Bruce Forsythe was an annoyance to both Still and Arvey, Catherine Smith conjures up a love triangle. Scandal sells books, but fictitious scandals are not the business of scholars, nor of university presses. Fabrications made to sensationalize academic pursuits will be untangled later on, and may haunt the perpetrators at some point in time.

Indeed, the worst of Smith's fabrications about Still and Forsythe appears when she suggests that Bruce Forsythe inspired Still to embrace his Negro heritage, as if Still needed a failed composer and a less-than-upstanding man to tell him to do what he had been doing all along. Still honored his racial origins with most of his orchestral compositions in the 1920's, with "Ebon Chronicle," "Darker America," "A Look at Jazz," "Africa," "Sahdji," the "Afro-American Symphony," and other works. Still was careful to acknowledge his inspiration in his sketch books and program notes, but he did not credit Bruce with any such influence. Furthermore, he eventually rejected the work that Forsythe did on the scenario of "Blue Steel," and he discarded the opera after it was finished.

When Smith subsequently suggests that Still lost the Black identity that Forsythe had given him, owing to the anti-Negro attitudes of his second wife, Verna Arvey, again her ideas are ludicrous. Still continued to write in the Negro idiom after he and Arvey met in 1934, and she and he created the wonderful ballet, "Lenox Avenue," together. (More about Verna Arvey and the African-American heritage later in this discussion.) For now, suffice it to say that Still's respect for his race is expressed in his articles, interviews and lectures, and these documents are in the archives and they are absolutely attributable to Still, even though Arvey shared his admiration for the ethnic components of his work.

THE HATCHET JOB ON VERNA ARVEY

Those who think it odd that Catherine Smith devalues William Grant Still, should also wonder what she has against Verna Arvey. After a discussion of some occurrences in Still's life, she suddenly announces that Still's wife was "abrasive," "not constructive," and that her humor was "sharp-edged." In addition, according to Smith, Arvey limited her husband's creativity, prevented him from expressing his racial identity, isolated him from his race and the general public, and turned him into a self-destructive political conservative. She says all of these

things without the least urge to provide evidence of their validity, and she stands by her opinions in spite of thousands of pages of published material written by Arvey and Still that disprove her accusations.

It must be interjected here that I took Catherine Smith to see my mother myself, I heard their conversation, and I have to say that my mother, Verna Arvey, was eminently gracious, helpful and forthcoming during their chat. Smith wanted to make a case for a close connection between Mary Carr Moore and John Cage, and she had heard that my mother attended an event which involved both Moore and Cage. (Smith was writing a book about Moore at the time.) It seemed to me that Smith was disappointed when my mother said that Mary Carr Moore was not a part of Cage's entourage—she was not considered to be a colleague of his. My mother was encouraged by Smith to change her statement, but my mother told her, with a sigh, that she had to report what she saw to be true.

Anyone who knew Verna Arvey well, knew her to be quite non-abrasive, always constructive, and probably the most knowledgeable and productive American music historian in the country. Lance Bowling, President of Cambria Master Recordings, has said on many occasions that Arvey had an incredible mind and talent, but that she was not confrontational or supercilious. If someone said something that was unfair or untrue, she listened quietly, then observed gently that, in her experience, such-and-such "was more likely to have happened" (Lance Bowling, phone call, 9/06/1998). Jester Hairston, popular composer of Black songs, always greeted me in Los Angeles with the words, "Judith, remember me to your Mother. A great lady." Dr. Richard Sartorius (noted scholar from Pepperdine University), Joseph Wagner (composer and author), and Eugene Hemmer (composer), told Lance Bowling that his friend, Verna Arvey, knew more about American and Negro music than anyone else in their acquaintance. By way of documentation, interested parties may read letters to and from Verna Arvey and Dr. Dominique René deLerma, Arvey and Carl Johnson, Arvey and Mildred Hall, Arvey and Delores Calvin, and other like correspondence, to understand the personality and ability of Verna Arvey.

More telling in the refutation of Smith's negative statements about Arvey is the huge block of evidence that Still's wife, far from being anti-Negro, was one of the most important promoters of Negro and Spanish-American culture in the 20th century. Even as a teenager, she wrote about composers of Color for the newspapers, and she played multinational and multiethnic piano music in her recitals. She concertized in Mexico, where she interacted with artistic people in fluent Spanish, after which she became herself the composer of many piano compositions in many idioms, which Dr. Richard Crosby is now editing for publication.

As Arvey's literary career developed, she wrote 168 articles and 5 books, the bulk of which were about Negro music and minority arts. Her book, *Choreographic Music*, was the first of its kind, giving as it did significant attention to the Negro dance. More importantly, she wrote a remarkable book on the Negro dance (*Dark Arabesque*) which we will publish, and this volume is, in and of itself,

evidence that Arvey was more in favor of the African-American identity than some Blacks themselves. Prejudice was unknown to her.

On top of all this, Verna Arvey also lectured widely about Negro music in Southern California—note entries in her diary, such as one from January 18, 1939, which says, “Gave lecture at Ruskin Club on Afro-American culture.” Catherine Smith read the Arvey Diaries—why did she not acknowledge such entries? After Arvey’s marriage to Still, she worked with him on lyrics for his songs, on libretti, and on press releases to promote his music. It was she who arranged for him to conduct an excerpt of Symphony #1 at the Hollywood Bowl in 1936. Her constant efforts to advance the composer’s career were so successful before 1949 that Mary Carr Moore said to her on one occasion, “Verna, I wish I had a wife like you to push my music.”

Not only did Arvey support and admire the genius and ideals of Still, but also she fought for the rights of other African-Americans in other situations. When the interracial members of the Short family were murdered by their White neighbors in the 1950’s, she engaged in a letter-writing campaign to prosecute the Whites who burned the Shorts to death in their home. She did this, even though she put herself in danger from retaliative attacks by racist groups. Does Catherine Smith mention the Short case? Of course she does not.

In fact, Smith appears to find it reprehensible that Arvey identified herself as a “Negro” when she concertized outside of California. What Smith does not know about racial restrictions before the 1960’s, leads her to criticize Arvey for taking on the appellation. It was common practice in those days for Whites who fraternized with, or married, Negroes to be forced to identify themselves as Colored people. As late as 1980, Census-takers encouraged mixed-race people to register as “Black,” even when intermarried couples chose the “White” designation. When my brother and I entered school or went to the doctor as children, we were told by officials to identify ourselves as Negroes.

As soon as legitimate scholars begin to understand the conditions under which Verna Arvey and William Grant Still labored, and the extent of the racial stereotypes that they sought to mitigate, they will encounter tremendous respect for the couple and for their unwillingness to forgo their ideals. When it is seen that Arvey was not a secret bigot who tried to make her husband ambivalent about his race, it will also be known for certain that she had not the time or the desire to write his articles and speeches for him to serve a biased point of view.

In fact, the William Grant Still papers in the archives show that Still could write his own letters, lectures and articles, and he did so. His manner of expression is clearly discernible from that of Arvey, but, like hers, it is articulate, reasoned and self-possessed. Letters that the composer typed before he met Verna Arvey can be compared to those he wrote after he met her, and no change of expression or ideology can be identified. In later years, when Arvey typed some of her husband’s letters and speeches for him, his notes, in his handwriting, validate the origin of the final product. Still himself described how he and his spouse worked on projects together (see pages 85 and 86 of *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, 2nd edition). The composer’s sketchbooks further

elucidate his strength of purpose and his control over all of his opera libretti, and other piano-vocal compositions.

Most riveting, where a question of Still's racial persona is concerned, is the knowledge that Still's use of Negro idioms did not stop when he met Verna Arvey. After 1934, he wrote "Pages from Negro History," "In Memoriam," "And They Lynched Him on a Tree," "Ennanga," "From the Delta," "Four Indigenous Portraits," "African Dancer," "Gamin," "Here's One," "Songs of Separation," "Three Rhythmic Spirituals," and a host of other Negroid works. He and Arvey, together, produced "Lenox Avenue," *Mota*, and "Those Who Wait." Since Arvey did not pen the sketches from which the works developed, and since the works were based on a Negro identity, it can not be said that she was directing Still's thinking or shaping his output. His method of creation did not change from the early 1930's to the late 1930's and afterward. Arvey and Still were a team, and Still was the team captain.

STIRRING UP TROUBLE FOR *TROUBLED ISLAND*

Nowhere in the history books and archives are there more documents available to tell the story of Still's ill-fated opera, *Troubled Island*, than in the Still-Arvey archives. These documents are largely reprinted and described in our book, *Just Tell the Story, Troubled Island*. It is impossible to talk about the opera without coming to grips with the letters and papers related to the production, which include U. S. State Department letters, eyewitness accounts, and other relevant materials.

Catherine Smith excludes all mention of the important revelations from these documents; instead, she commits libel by asserting that the editors of the book (myself and my daughter) did not publish the materials accurately. Further, she degrades the publication by calling it "self-published." This latter insult is off-the-mark, because The Master-Player Library, which is the publishing company in this case, is an entity that is a legitimate member of the R. R. Bowker group of publishers, its publications have ISBN numbers, its publications are assigned catalogue numbers by the Library of Congress (which is only done for significant works that will be added to the Library's collection), and all publications are funded by the sale of its many titles. Two of The Master-Player Library titles have won national awards, and its sales are worldwide, in numbers that outstrip those of most scholarly presses. My daughter and I hold university degrees, and we both graduated with honors; both of us belong to honor societies.

Aside from our qualifications as editors, we did not put the book together in a vacuum: we had assistance in editing from several leading experts in the field, including Dominique deLerma and Lance Bowling. The publication committee will challenge anyone in academia to compare the text to the originals in the archives, and to find any distortion of the truth. What appears there can not be rendered impotent by a flippant disregard. Indeed, the book is so admirable in its validity that it is being used in several colleges and universities in various courses, and it has won a publication award for excellence.

Yet, Smith repudiates the book and its contents. Then, to justify her rejection of the book and of the opera, she changes the facts about the opera's production to suit her disapprobation. She says that there were 6 curtain calls on opening night, when, in fact, testimony shows that there were 21. It would have been impossible for a world premiere on the major New York stage to have been greeted by only 6 curtain calls, for a mere 6 would not have allowed time for all of the cast and principals plus conductor, stage director and composer to come to the front for recognition. A vindictive reporter may have claimed there were only 6, but such a claim would have had to be a falsehood. Smith says that there was a celebration and/or party afterward the premiere that Still did not attend, but if there was such a party, Still was definitely not invited owing to his race. Smith accuses the Still family of pointing to Taubman as the one who alerted Still to the plot against his opera, when our book clearly states that it was John Briggs who blew the whistle.

In order to convey the impression that the opera failed because it was substandard, Smith does not reprint any praises of the music by members of the audience such as Kay Swift, but she does include page after page of negative reviews of the production. Because she insists that the critics did not institute intrigues against the composer's work, the reader has no choice but to understand that the closing of the show was the composer's fault. In one place, she ventures to suggest that Still's anti-communist leanings defeated the opera, but she does not show how this could have been logical, when Still's librettist, Langston Hughes, was pro-Communist.

Subsequently, our author shifts gears and asserts that Still's operas written with Verna Arvey were substandard because Arvey was a poor librettist. Did *Troubled Island* fail for this reason? No, she insists, because Langston wrote the entire libretto. However, the archives and letters from Langston reveal that Verna Arvey wrote all of the love arias in the show, and that the love arias were the most highly-praised aspects of the opera, except for Langston's "I Dream a World." Having denied that Verna Arvey contributed to the libretto, Smith criticizes Still for asking for a small royalty for his wife to compensate her for her work. In the end, the reader is told that Still's operas, regardless of the libretti, were unexceptional. The truth, attested to by the recordings of four of the Still-Arvey operas, is that Arvey was no more a poor librettist than Still was a faulty composer. The music has a power that survives its enemies.

In the end, how does Catherine Smith explain the U. S. State Department's attempt to eradicate the recordings of *Troubled Island*? How does she explain the letters that speak of a cabal (an intrigue)? Had the composer not kept his recordings in spite of government attempts to retrieve them, no one would have been able to hear the work in the last two centuries. How does she explain the attacks on Still by known fellow-travelers, and the increase of fortune of people who opposed Still (such as Copland and Bernstein), while Still and Arvey struggled against poverty and neglect? If the opera were truly a bad work, as Smith intimates, the explanation is therein, yet the immense ovation given it by the audience, and heard partially on the recordings, tells the real story of *Troubled Island*, Catherine Smith notwithstanding.

WHEN THE IN-GROUP RISES ABOVE THE OUT-GROUP

It is possible to destroy reputations more expeditiously by what you do not say, than by what you do say. Indeed, the deletion of primary facts is the heart and soul of political propaganda. Catherine Smith deals with the Still and Arvey years after 1949 by not talking about any of the critical aspects of that period. She observes that Still mainly did "commercial work," even though he wrote his finest orchestral pieces for children then, three more grand operas, two more symphonies, and many endearing suites, chamber pieces, choral pieces, and other works. In addition, he and Verna Arvey lectured in the schools, served on municipal boards, and continued important correspondence with scholars and writers across the country. They were heard on Los Angeles radio stations, and on "Good Morning, America" on television. They attended meetings of ASCAP, of the American Federation of Musicians, of the NAACP, of the National Association of Negro Musicians, of Bahai groups, and of the Theosophists and Rosicrucians. They visited local libraries and museums to do research for their operas.

As for Smith's rank contention that the couple was isolated, friendless, out-of-touch with society, unregarded and unloved, there is no falsehood of hers that is less provable and less likely. The letters, cards, performance reports, diaries of Arvey, and my own recollections and those of my two oldest children, disclose that the Stills had hundreds of friends, and they were consistently in the company of those who admired them and enjoyed their bright personalities. They attended concerts and lectures, had friends to lunch, and went to other homes for dinner. They dined out with Marjorie Lange and Sheila and Ted Phillips, and others. Sylvia Phillips Walker, the daughter of Ted and Sheila, can corroborate the endearing relationship that her family had with the Stills. The composer and his wife, and sometimes their children as well, attended spiritual reading sessions at the home of their dear friend, Marjorie Lange, and we will publish the transcripts from these sessions at a later time. (These meetings were not séances as Smith claims, but they were communications through automatic writing.) Far from being isolated from the Black community, William Grant Still received awards and invitations from all of the African-American cultural groups in Southern California, and there are photographs in the archives to prove it.

Smith states that the Stills distanced themselves from the Civil Rights activists of their time, and she seems to believe that activism was the sum-total of the attitudes in the Afro-American community. Such is not the case. The majority of persons of Color from 1950 to 1980 were not advocates of Black power and racial separatism, nor were they ultra-liberal. Most educated and cultured African-Americans were conservatively in favor of the Gandhi approach to racial problems, and they were largely conventional, law-abiding, religious and proud of their history. They did not approve of the gangs that took over college campuses. Not being in league with so-called Black leaders who shouted insults at the White population, did not mean that a person of Color had no Colored friends. Black Power was one thing, Afro-American heritage and achievement were quite another. As the century came to an end, it was discovered that the advocates of Black Power were themselves out-of-touch with the most valuable legacies of their race, and their attempts at coercion gave way to more moderate movements toward equity.

Meanwhile, the Stills had Afro-American friends in plenty, friends such as Georgia Laster, Leroy Hurte, Bessie Lawson Blackman, Hale Smith, Nimrod Allen, Grant Venerable, and so on. The diaries are filled with these friends, as they are with the couple's Spanish friends, Jewish friends, and artistic people from most other national and racial groups in society. A special relationship existed with their Japanese-American friend, Teru Izumida, whose sad relegation to a mental hospital after her imprisonment in an American concentration camp, led the Stills to make frequent trips to Camarillo, California, to visit her and to try to ease her mental condition.

In addition to visiting friends in the hospital, Verna-Arvey collected gifts and clothes to ship to poor Native-American school children, while Still made wooden toys and other presents for parents and children of their acquaintance. Poor they were, and shunned they were, from 1950 to 1987, by opera companies, record companies, artistic directors and the media, but they never lost their kindness and humanity, and they never gave up on the goal that they had set for themselves—to bring interracial understanding to the nation. This goal is nowhere in sight in the writings of Catherine Smith, for she appears to relish the job of rekindling old stereotypes, and old hatreds. But the archives will keep the goal uppermost, until the Stills are rediscovered as they really were, for the benefit of future generations.

THE CIVIL WAR HAS YET TO END

Bigotry still abides in our nation—it dies very hard. And, in my opinion, people like Catherine Smith keep the struggle alive. She might not have been successful thus far, if university presses that have printed her books (the University of Illinois Press and the University of California Press) had adhered to a higher standard. Our scholars and editors are accountable for the truthfulness of history, and yet they court scandal and bias. We can not rely upon the past for direction if our academic institutions falsify the legacies of the greatest leaders of our era.

When university presses perpetuate falsehood, for whatever reason, the consequences are dire. Subsequent researchers, in the scramble to advance in the publish-or-perish system, do not go to primary sources; instead, they discuss statements made by ill-intentioned scholars and they treat these declarations as reality. The scholar with all the admirable credentials enforces the “willing suspension of disbelief” that is required by fiction, but which is death to historical knowledge. Truth ennobles, deceit destroys. Poor scholarship, and an academia that strives to shape opinions, creates dictatorships, enslaves minds, and sets the civilized clock back thousands of years.

The University of Illinois Press, and the University of California Press, having published the false, destructive and unworthy attacks of Catherine Smith, must be held accountable, for what they have done to the memories of two worthy and self-sacrificing public figures. When the documents in the Still-Arvey Collection are properly appreciated, the debt will come due, for the public will demand payment.