

# H-Net Reviews

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Sherry L. Hoppe, Bruce W. Speck. *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007. xix + 290 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-587-5.

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## A Black Woman's Smile

A student recently made me aware of an Internet phenomenon of sorts, a recitation and slideshow that is getting heavy exposure in cyberspace, particularly among African American women. Written and produced by a poet named Ty Gray-EL, the multimedia project is entitled "A Black Woman's Smile." On some Web sites, there is a subtitle that follows: "A Tribute to All Black Women, Past, Present, and Future." As a poem with pictures (such historical actors as Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer are featured), it conveys a simple and seemingly heartfelt message: African American women have endured a great deal of pain, tragedy, and sorrow in the Western Hemisphere, and they warrant better treatment than they have received.

Ultimately, the plea from Gray-EL is that African American men need to understand that past and treat their female counterparts with the respect and honor that they deserve. Obviously the "tribute" is problematic on several levels—just for starters, the appeal is apolitical and assumes that the objectification of women should represent the supreme aspiration of both sexes. Yet, in the end, there is one assertion that Gray-EL seems to have gotten right: black women in both slavery and freedom indeed have often had a reason *not* to smile.

This brings us to Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck's authorized biography of civil rights activist Maxine Smith. By focusing on the life of Smith, the authors attempt to shed light on the black freedom struggle as

it evolved in Memphis, Tennessee. They could not have chosen a more representative figure. Smith was a central organizer in the local movement. She served as executive director of the Memphis chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for more than forty years. She also won election to the Memphis City School Board, where she worked for the complete integration of the community's educational system for more than two decades. Continuing her quest for education reform, Smith received an appointment to the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), the governing body of the state university and community college system; she remained on the board for more than ten years. In 2002, the TBR unanimously approved a resolution changing the name of the existing Geier Fellowship Program (created as part of a lawsuit aimed at desegregating public institutions of higher learning in the state) to the Maxine Smith Fellowship Program. The award, which prepares minority employees of the board for higher levels of authority, represented the institution's salute to Smith's unwavering efforts to advance education and civil rights. During this long career in public life, no one was more tenacious in fighting for racial equality, particularly in the area of education. Against oppression of any kind, Smith tirelessly worked to educate both her supporters and opponents about doing the right thing, not because of court mandates, but because it was morally right or just to do so.

Yet, Smith found that appeals to conscience did not

necessarily get results. She learned early in life the reasons why black women might not feel like smiling. Born Maxine Atkins in 1929, she graduated at fifteen from Memphis's racially segregated Booker T. Washington High School. She graduated from Spelman College in Atlanta in 1949 and returned to Memphis. Following her father's example, Maxine struggled to force the larger white world to respect her, insisting on being treated with dignity; however, she found that many whites considered her "uppity."

Failing to attain a teaching job in the city, Atkins decided to return to college. Hoping to pursue a Master's degree, she understood that southern state institutions would not accept African American candidates; she also became aware that to adhere to a skewed reading of "separate but equal" legal doctrine, southern state governments provided funds for minority students to attend out-of-state colleges. Taking advantage of this Jim/Jane Crow stipulation, Smith traveled to Middlebury College in Vermont, where she obtained a graduate degree in French.

On returning to Memphis for a second time, Smith, who had since married Vasco Smith, a fellow Memphian who had graduated from Meharry Medical College with a degree in dentistry, joined a social circle of other college-educated and professional African Americans within the city. In 1957, when she and Miriam Sugarmon, a graduate of Wellesley, attempted to enter Memphis State University for further graduate studies and were turned away by the admissions office, it changed her life forever. Angered by such blatant racial discrimination, Smith vowed to fight and change the system. She volunteered to work for the NAACP, where, over the next several years, she coordinated protests, boycotts, voter registration drives, and public school desegregation efforts.

By 1962, Smith had become the executive secretary of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP. She continued in her endeavors to "teach unwilling pupils" about the necessity of desegregating public spaces in Memphis (p. 79). The unrelenting advocate was "both loved and hated" for pushing with all of her might to create an environment that recognized the dignity of African Americans (p. xiii). She attacked with a vengeance a status quo that still allowed segregation of water fountains, public restrooms, lunch counters, playgrounds, and the city zoo. At different times, she would convert herself into "the chisel" or "the sledgehammer," always ready to challenge and change existing circumstances (p. 38). She utilized whatever means she deemed necessary.

In 1969, for instance, Smith tackled the issue of segregated city schools in Memphis. Hoping to pressure the school board into creating a balanced racial system that would assimilate African American administrators, principals, teachers, and students, she went after the agency's pocketbook. She established what was known as "Black Mondays," a district-wide boycotting of schools by the students themselves that put in jeopardy federal funding. The results were ambiguous; unintended consequences, especially the creation of violent and chaotic school environments, in many ways represented the changing tenor of the times. The year 1969 was not 1959, and many within a new generation of African American students who had witnessed the '60s did not necessarily appreciate nonviolent protest or even the need for school attendance. Nevertheless, in the end, observers witnessed a restructuring of the school board that allowed for the election of African Americans to its ranks. Smith would run for and win a seat on the board. Yet, the public school system during this period basically imploded, dividing itself racially, as many whites, fearing the consequences of integration, fled to the outlying suburbs, taking all-important tax dollars with them. Left behind was an underfunded urban school system with little means to counter negative perceptions and failing grades.

Thus, Smith's tenure on the board was beset by racial and class tensions, as issues like busing and city/county consolidations took center stage. Through it all, she continued to emphasize equality and justice for all. One of her greatest accomplishments involved helping Willie Herenton, a veteran principal who looked to her as a mentor, become superintendent of the Memphis city schools in 1978. She also played a vital role in his successful run for mayor one decade later. Rightly or wrongly, however, Herenton's victories, both as superintendent and mayor, polarized the city along racial lines. In many ways, it symbolized Smith's ironic legacy. By the early 1990s, when Smith left the school board to take her position on the TBR, she had definitely made her presence known. Indeed, as she proclaimed on the conclusion of her school board tenure, "I gave them hell on that board" (p. 202). Without a doubt, the same could be said for her earlier time as NAACP executive secretary and her later service on the TBR.

Early in their work, Hoppe, president of Austin Peay State University (a TBR institution), and Speck, the university's provost and vice president for academic and student affairs, speculate as to how they could convey all of the pain and anger that Smith had endured in her lifetime. They attempt to show how such raw and cutting

emotions coalesced within Smith to form a positive push for change. In this, the authors are successful. They definitely convey the commitment and compassion that drove Smith to confront the wrongs that plagued her society. They are not as successful, however, in putting Smith into a larger context that helps readers understand the times in which she lived. But, this may be too much to expect from what is the first biography of the civil rights pioneer.

More of a memoir than a critical assessment, the work revolves around the simple theme that Smith continually had to teach people in the community about its shortcomings. While a bit redundant, the point that Smith could rarely rest in her endeavors is clearly made. *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils* is based on research in the Memphis Public Library archives devoted to Smith (there are fifty boxes that Smith donated to the library) and some twenty-five interviews. Surprised that scholars had not yet dealt with Smith's role in the history of Memphis or the civil rights movement, Hoppe and Speck felt a moral obligation to get her story written in a timely fashion. In this, the collaboration may prove extremely valuable,

for it does provide a solid factual foundation for future scholars.

Smith argues in *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils* that she did not act alone in any of her endeavors and was always surrounded by a loving group of friends and family. That group would include her husband Vasco and son Smitty, who apparently grew up in the movement. There is no doubt that she is correct. But, Smith stood out because she took a stand against injustice and refused to back down, no matter how great the obstacles. Her aggressive style certainly alienated many, if not most, of the people with whom she came into contact. Yet, it can be argued that it was the lifelong conditions that she and other African American women had to face that produced a sternness that only those who have experienced similar circumstances can understand. The questions for future scholars of Maxine Smith are important ones for putting her into a larger historical context: Did other successful female leaders of the civil rights movement have a similarly aggressive style? In what other ways, and with what other results, did her contemporaries channel their anger over their lack of access to equal opportunities?

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