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Image, Discourse, Facts: Southern White Women in the Fight for Desegregation, 1954-1965

Anne Stefani

- 1 The power of images and myth-making is well known for being especially strong in the South and in southern history, and it is all the more so as one becomes interested in white women during the first half of the twentieth century.¹ One of the major and most obvious characteristics of the South between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s was its conservatism and its wish to preserve its distinctive culture and institutions, including white supremacy and segregation, and it is no surprise that the definition of southern white womanhood should be first identified with this conservative outlook. Indeed, whenever one refers to southern women during the segregation era, the image that comes up at once is that of a sweet, fragile, old-fashioned creature mainly devoted to her home, her church, and possibly the glorification of Confederate heroes (Coryell et al., eds., 1). In other words, white southern womanhood in the first half of the twentieth century is usually associated with the figure of the so-called “southern lady”, i.e. a Victorian lady, southern style. The image of the lady, which dates back to the *antebellum* era, was actually re-used and re-shaped in the late nineteenth century by the white supremacists who institutionalized segregation in part as a means for white men to justify the oppression of black men in the name of the protection of white womanhood.²
- 2 The present article aims at demonstrating that although the ideal of the southern lady pervaded the regional culture throughout the segregation era, a significant number of white women who apparently conformed to it, actually challenged the racial and gender assumptions on which it had been constructed. Few scholars have studied the ideal of the southern lady beyond its obvious connection with the conservatism characterizing southern society and culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Two studies paved the way for research on this subject: Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady* (1970), and Jacquelyn Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry*, first published in 1979. They dealt, however,

with specific groups of women, and did not extend beyond World War II. A number of monographs have been published recently, focusing on specific organizations or places, but no comprehensive study has yet been devoted to southern white women in the segregation and desegregation eras.³ An important book, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege* (2004), edited by Gail Murray, revolves around the topic, but it is a collection of articles and the vision it provides is a mosaic of individual experiences rather than a comprehensive perspective. This article studies the specific identity of white southern female reformers during the segregation era by analyzing the nature and the evolution of their racial activism. It shows that, far from being the guardians of segregationist culture, thousands of white women undermined segregation throughout that era without seeming to do so, most of the time through church-related activities, and in a quiet, non-confrontational way.⁴

- 3 If this is true of the whole segregation era—from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s—it is all the more so of the decade running from the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision of 1954 to the Voting Rights Act passed by Congress in 1965, a decade historians sometimes call the “Second Reconstruction”, in reference to the school desegregation crisis that opposed integrationists and federal authorities to southern segregationists. As southern leaders openly defied the Supreme Court and called the white population to resist school desegregation by all means, some white women worked quietly for the implementation of the *Brown* decision against the will of their communities.
- 4 If a majority of these women were not ready to go as far as rejecting segregation altogether, the leaders of the main women's groups active at mid-century were deeply committed to racial integration, but resorted to other means than direct action to achieve this goal. In a majority of cases, they based their actions on the use of image and discourse—in particular the image of the southern lady—to persuade their fellow Southerners that segregation had to be abandoned. This conciliatory approach has led historians to view them as conservative or moderate at best, as compared to the outspoken civil rights activists of the same period. In fact, it can be argued that far from being conservative, or even moderate, these women leaders were activists of a different kind, liberal on the surface, but radical in depth.⁵
- 5 The decade spanning the years between the *Brown* decision and the Voting Rights Act is a particularly interesting one because it was a period of crisis—in the sense that it was marked by the direct confrontation of arch-segregationists and integrationists—but it was also a period of transition from one generation of female racial dissenters to another—the term “generation” being used in a broad sense for the sake of analysis.⁶ Most within the first generation were born at the turn of the twentieth century whereas the members of the second generation were born in the 1930s and early 1940s. Consequently, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the two groups overlapped and participated in the same events, which makes the period unique in that it offers a rare richness of nuances and depth of perspective. While the older generation belonged to the middle and upper classes, the younger activists were of more diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This difference in class accounts in great part for the paternalism that characterized the older generation whose members were drawn to racial activism through reform activities led by the middle class since the Progressive Era. There were many differences of opinion among the women involved in the desegregation crisis, from the most conservative to the most radical, and there were

also various degrees of defense of integration, but the common characteristic to all of them, leaders and followers, was the direct connection between their religious faith and their commitment to racial justice.

- 6 It will be shown that the image of the southern lady was a double-edged sword in the hands of white women and of their opponents. On the one hand, it could be used as a weapon in the fight against segregation, but, on the other, it could also become an obstacle for those who wanted to be more outspoken or more direct in their actions. After a presentation of the figure of the southern lady in segregationist culture and of the context of the period under study, the reflection will focus on the use of image and discourse as a form of activism. I will then examine the limitations of such tactics and the necessity for some women to reject the image in order to act in conformity with their ideals.

1. Southern ladies and race

- 7 The southern belle and the southern lady were the two models for white women in southern society and culture from the *antebellum* era to the 1960s. Historian Anne Goodwyn Jones provides a very complete definition of these ideal figures revealing their far-reaching implications in the lives of white women in the South:

Southern lore has it that the belle is a privileged white girl who is at the glamorous and exciting period between being a daughter and becoming a wife. She is the fragile, dewy, just-opened bloom of the southern female: flirtatious but sexually innocent, bright but not deep, beautiful as a statue or painting or porcelain but risky to touch. A form of popular art, she entertains but does not challenge her audience. Instead, she attracts them—the more gentlemen callers the better—and finally allows herself to be chosen by one.

Then she becomes a lady, and a lady she will remain until she dies—unless, of course, she does something beyond the pale. As a lady she drops the flirtatiousness of the belle and stops chattering; she has won her man. Now she has a different job: satisfying her husband, raising his children, meeting the demands of the family's social position, and sustaining the ideals of the South. Her strength in manners and morals is contingent, however, upon her submission to their sources—God, the patriarchal church, her husband—and upon her staying out of public life, where she might interfere in their formulation. But in her domestic realm she can achieve great if sometimes grotesque power. (Jones 42)

- 8 The figure of the southern lady can be traced back to the *antebellum* South, at the time when women North and South still had to conform to strict gender norms and were confined to the domestic sphere where their role involved the running of the house and educating the children. At the turn of the twentieth century, the status of women changed as a result of several developments such as industrialization, urbanization, the growth of the consumer society, the expansion of female education, the spread of social reform movements, and, of course, the first feminist movement which led to the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920 (Evans 145-173). However, change did not come as fast in the South as in the rest of the nation because of the conservatism that characterized the region and which had been reinforced by the restoration of white supremacy after Reconstruction. Indeed, the establishment of segregation at the turn of the twentieth century and the defense of the system throughout the following decades slowed down social progress in the South so that class and gender norms evolved less rapidly there than elsewhere during the segregation era.⁷

- 9 Indeed, in the late nineteenthth century, since the white leaders of the ex-Confederate States pledged themselves to white supremacy in the region, southern culture and society were reshaped in conformity with the resurgent racist ideology of the time. The image of the southern lady was then revived and adjusted to the new segregationist doctrine. White women actually played a fundamental role in the restoration, and then in the preservation of white supremacy in the South, because it was in their name that white men justified the oppression of black men. The white supremacist leaders rewrote history by declaring that the Civil War had been waged to defend a superior civilization whose main incarnation was the southern lady. The dominant discourse defined white womanhood as sacred, because women were seen primarily as the guardians of the white race. The preservation of their purity was presented as the main protection against the mixing of the black and white races, and it was in the name of the protection of white southern womanhood that lynching was justified. In exchange for protection, of course, the women were supposed to behave in conformity with the men's expectations, i.e. they were to remain submissive, they were not supposed to indulge in any intellectual or political activities, and they were officially in charge of the home, of the children and of church-related activities.⁸ If the ideal of the southern lady conditioned first and foremost the lives of white middle and upper-class women, it was so intricately linked to the maintenance of white supremacy that its influence extended to all white women in the South (Wolfe 7-9).

2. The 1950s as a pivotal decade

- 10 When the desegregation crisis heightened in the mid-1950s, this view of white womanhood still prevailed in southern culture and society. Thousands of women were indeed involved in reform-oriented work and church activities in the fields of health care, relief and education for the poor, among other things. Churchwomen and religious associations such as the YWCA and Methodist women's groups were very influential in their field, but some non-religious organizations such as the League of Women Voters were also active in political and social reform. All of them had started questioning the legitimacy of segregation in the previous decade.⁹ New groups reflecting women's growing concern for racial justice in the South had been formed starting during World War II. For instance, United Church Women (UCW)—originally United Council of Church Women—was an interdenominational organization created in 1941 to the specific purpose of extending democratic principles to all spheres of society.¹⁰ In the same spirit, Dorothy Tilly, a prominent Methodist leader who had been a member of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, founded the Fellowship of the Concerned (FOC), “a fellowship of Church women leaders of both races and the three faiths, concerned about their South”, in 1949. With a membership of 4,000 members one year after its creation, the FOC focused its efforts on the racial issue after 1954 through local workshops and regional conferences designed to persuade southern whites to accept desegregation (“Fellowship of the Concerned”; Riehm 24).
- 11 Several factors contributed to leading white southern women reformers to refocus their energy on racial integration in the 1950s. First, in the aftermath of World War II, black protest against segregation kept rising and the southern black community became more and more militant. Some federal initiatives also slowly contributed to undermining segregation. For example, in December 1946, President Truman appointed

a Committee on Civil Rights, which declared in the following year that segregation was wrong and which proposed federal measures to eliminate it.¹¹ The next landmark in the struggle against segregation was the *Brown* decision, which, in 1954, declared school segregation unconstitutional. In 1955 the Supreme Court asked the states to desegregate their school systems “with all deliberate speed”. The stage was set for the worst national crisis since the Civil War and Reconstruction.¹²

- 12 Southern politicians did not recognize the legitimacy of the *Brown* decision and called for massive resistance to its implementation. Southern legislatures passed resistance laws. White Citizens Councils were set up to exert pressure on school boards, teachers, and all supporters of the *Brown* decision. The Ku Klux Klan was revived. Moreover, as the crisis coincided with McCarthyism, the white supremacists used anti-communism to repress all racial dissenters by accusing them of being affiliated with communism. In such a context, anyone who disapproved of segregation and was ready or willing to implement the *Brown* decision was labeled “radical” and persecuted as such by local authorities and their communities.¹³
- 13 With the spread of massive resistance across the South, local groups were formed in response to the states' threat to close the schools rather than desegregate them. Although some of these were composed of both men and women, all were actually led and managed only by women. They included Little Rock's Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC) and Atlanta's Help Our Public Education (HOPE), both formed in 1958, New Orleans's Save Our Schools (SOS), formed in 1960, and Mississippians for Public Education (MPE), formed in 1964.¹⁴ Most of the women who joined the new groups had been members of the older reform organizations. While all save-the-schools groups acted on the same principles and were strikingly similar in membership as well as in the tactics they adopted, the present article, when dealing with them, will focus more particularly on HOPE as an emblematic example of “lady activism”.¹⁵

3. Image as a weapon

- 14 Given the climate of intolerance and the risks that reformers ran by advocating desegregation at the time, the women who wanted the *Brown* decision to be implemented as a step forward toward racial equality relied on the power of image and discourse rather than on open confrontation with segregationist authorities. They deliberately downplayed the issue of race and presented themselves as southern ladies working for the preservation of education in their region.
- 15 The image of the lady was a good protection for white women. It actually gave them a certain freedom to act because they did not seem to transgress gender/social norms when they presented themselves as the moral guardians of their communities. Their close association with churches kept them in their traditional role, outside of politics and social agitation. This aspect was reinforced by the school crisis, during which they presented themselves as mothers who were mostly concerned about the future of southern children. Motherhood was the centerpiece of all save-the-school movements' discourse. HOPE leaders publicized their fight in the papers by declaring:
HOPE, Inc. does not propose to argue the pros and cons of segregation vs. desegregation, or states rights vs. federal rights. It has one aim—to champion children's right to an education within the state of Georgia. (Dartt 45)¹⁶

- 16 A typical example of lady/mother activist was Nan Pendergrast, head of HOPE's Speakers' Bureau, who belonged to an old prominent Atlanta family. She gave birth to seven children while devoting her life to a great variety of causes, including racial integration. She was particularly popular with the city's newspapers who portrayed her as a model mother and wife who played a nurturing role in society without threatening the social order.¹⁷
- 17 Another advantage of being identified as southern ladies was that many women felt they were actually freer than their husbands to act in favor of racial reform, because they did not risk losing their business as a result of their dissenting positions. Some men even encouraged their wives to act in their place. Such was the case, for instance, with Milton Tilly who reportedly drove his wife, Dorothy, around Atlanta's poor neighborhoods in the early 1930s in order to convince her to dedicate her time to reform. He told her:
- I thought if you saw the people hurting long enough, that you would hurt, too—and if you hurt bad enough, you'd do something about it! *I can't do it myself*, but I'll make it possible if money is needed for you to get involved. I'll back you! (Riehm 29)
- 18 This was how Dorothy Tilly became one of the most prominent southern female reformers at mid-twentieth century.¹⁸
- 19 Finally, white women often used lady-like manners to exert pressure on politicians. Indeed, some of them had lobbied state congressmen, senators, and governors, as well as judges and law officers, since the 1930s (notably in their fight against lynching and against voting rights restrictions in the South).¹⁹ Lady manners and dress became part and parcel of the women's tactical apparatus during the school desegregation crisis. In their lobbying campaigns, they purposely wore white gloves, nice dresses and hats so that the men who received them could not dismiss them as “radical agitators” or as threats to the peace. The technique was often successful as some male politicians were just incapable of coping with this type of action that was completely unexpected. This aspect of white women's activism bore a striking resemblance to the attitude and manner of dressing of African American activists during the same period, of which the Montgomery Bus Boycott provides an illuminating example.²⁰ Of course, unlike African Americans, who had to face the prejudices of whites, white women who conformed to the social and gender norms of their society did not have to struggle to impose an image of respectability, but they deliberately used this image to transgress norms in a subtle way. Thus, Tilly told Guion Johnson, one of her co-workers: “When you go out to battle, you must dress for the occasion.” And Johnson commented: “So, she wore frilly hats with flowers and lace on them and frilly dresses and always with white gloves, and she was accepted by the sheriffs and the commissioners and the city councilors [sic]... (Johnson 4-5).” Frances Pauley, a key member of HOPE, recalls how she carefully selected the members of the organization who went to the Georgia state legislature to campaign for open public schools in 1960, and the directions she and other leaders gave them: “We told everybody to dress very nicely and wear white gloves and told them not to say anything—not to boo, not to clap, not to do a thing.” Once they were in the gallery and segregationist politicians began to speak, they all took out signs reading “We Want Public Schools” (Nasstrom, ed., 57-58). Pauley explained later: “HOPE was very genteel. We operated in a very nice manner; it was a little bit hard for people to get at us” (Pauley 1983, 6).²¹

- 20 The figure of the lady was also linked to a key notion in the fight for desegregation, the notion of respectability. Because at the time all critics of the racial *status quo* were accused by the segregationists of being “outside agitators” or communists, the women leaders and the organizations in which they played a major role used respectability as a tactic.²² This was essential firstly to attract the highest number of followers who did not dare speak in favor of desegregation for fear of retaliation, and secondly to avoid repression by the segregationist forces. This is the reason why, for instance, the founders of HOPE chose as their official chairperson a woman who would attract the highest number of people thanks to her profile. The organization's historian, Rebecca Dartt, notes:

Fran Breeden seemed the logical choice. She had perfect credentials for the job: she was southern, having been born and raised on Florida's Gulf coast; Protestant; charming; articulate; and unknown in Atlanta. (Dartt 40)

- 21 All save-the-schools groups actually put on the same southern, white, middle-class, Protestant, and conservative profile. Besides, the women clearly placed their action within the boundaries of domesticity as the first meetings set up to launch the movement took the form of tea parties at the organizers' homes (Dartt 60-61).
- 22 Save-the-school groups were very diverse in their positions on integration, but it is undeniable that their leaders were deeply committed to integration, even though they never put this to the fore. They deliberately opted for an all-white policy, not necessarily because of any hostility to blacks, but because they thought it necessary to gain acceptance within their communities. Frances Pauley recalled that she had first objected to limiting the scope of the organization to whites, but that “this was a political issue, and at that point it looked like maybe this would be the best way to go, tactically”. She added that her black friends agreed that such an option seemed to be the best in the circumstances (Nasstrom, ed., 55).²³
- 23 It was actually deemed safer and more efficient to tone down race as an issue and to emphasize education or human relations instead. As an illustration, the many Councils on Human Relations which were created across the South after 1954 to ease the desegregation process actually dealt with race relations but would not use the term to define their work. According to Eliza Paschall, a white liberal woman who served as executive director of one of those councils, “human relations” was the southern phrase for “race relations” (Paschall 1975, 7). Some words such as “integration” or “desegregation” remained taboo. Significantly, the founders of WEC “had first envisioned starting a committee for racial harmony, but because of the crisis they had decided that this in itself would create opposition, so the focus for the new group was to be 'strictly aimed at saving the public schools'”. This tactical stance was conveyed in subsequent campaigns by flyers hammering out the same message: “NOT For Integration, NOT For Segregation, FOR Public Education” (Murphy 75, 80). As for SOS, one of its leaders said: “They wanted it to look like we were just keeping the schools open, although in the back of our hearts a lot of us were assaulting the bastions of segregation” (Frystak 88).
- 24 Such a tactic proved quite successful in a certain number of cases, as in Georgia for instance, where HOPE could be credited for leading the state's authorities to admit that a significant section of the population preferred integrated schools to no schools at all (Dartt 92). As an illustration, Governor Vandiver appointed a Committee on Schools which came to be known as the Sibley Commission after its chair's name. The

Commission was charged with examining the situation of public schools in the state and giving recommendations as to the implementation of the *Brown* decision, which the state legislature officially resisted. The Commission organized ten hearings in March 1960 (Dartt 90), and public opinion gradually changed between the first and the last one, thus indicating that HOPE's campaign had had a significant impact. In the end, the majority of the population was still opposed to integration, but the report and recommendations of the commission reflected a widespread reluctance to maintaining segregation at all costs.²⁴ After a two-year battle, the politicians finally did not move to close the schools when the local courts mandated the implementation of the *Brown* decision, thus indicating that HOPE's campaign had been effective.

- 25 As for churchwomen across the South, they often managed to persuade their communities to accept desegregation without violence, even if their success was not spectacular because acceptance, being less sensational than resistance, was mostly not publicized. However, the hundreds of letters and reports about the progress being made, sent by local members of the various Councils on Human Relations scattered across the states, are undeniable evidence about this invisible contribution. School desegregation took a long time because of white resistance, but it can be argued that the crisis would have been much worse had not the women created bridges between communities. What is especially striking when reading the correspondence women leaders received as the civil rights movement unfolded is the omnipresence of the words “fear” and “courage.” Indeed, as the segregationists spread terror across local communities, hundreds of churchwomen who participated in interracial regional conferences organized by groups such as Dorothy Tilly's Fellowship of the Concerned returned to their communities totally transformed.²⁵ They then wrote Tilly to thank her for inspiring them and giving them the courage to act at the local level.²⁶
- 26 Yet the tactic of respectability also had its limitations since it neither openly called for a comprehensive repudiation of white supremacist culture, nor explicitly advocated the repeal of segregationist laws. Besides, the white women who exclusively played the card of southern ladyhood, could only go as far as persuading their leaders to accept change, but could not force them to alter the system. This weakness became all the more obvious when integrationist forces radicalized in the early 1960s. White resistance continued, school desegregation remained mostly symbolical, and the black civil rights movement adopted a much more vocal and radical stance than the one that civil rights activists had expressed in the previous decades.

4. Image as a liability

- 27 One of the weaknesses of “lady” activism was the persistence of ingrained white prejudice among some of the white women who worked toward interracial cooperation, which limited their relations with blacks. This was especially true of the older generation. The paternalism inherited from earlier reform movements tended to disappear with the development of the Civil Rights Movement, but it could not be totally eliminated in a matter of a few years. Racial prejudice was the result of long-lasting oppression of African Americans, of racial separation, and the ensuing total incomprehension between the two racial groups in the South. Thus, as long as they remained outside of the African American community—which was the case of most racial reformers until the 1950s—white women could not know black people, and, not

knowing them, they could not feel equal to them. The members of the older generation had indeed inherited the racial prejudices of their class, which undeniably limited the strength of their activism. Black women sometimes resented this paternalism, and many white women deliberately struggled to overcome it. Frances Pauley, for instance, decided at one point that she had to learn about blacks in order to relate to them. She started going to Atlanta University, which was all black, and became friends with Sadie Mays, the wife of Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College. The black woman helped her correct her errors and fight her personal prejudices. Pauley recalls in her autobiography: "I remember that she was the one who first corrected me when I said, 'Nigra.' She said, 'Now listen—Negro.' That's when 'Negro' was the word to use" (Nasstrom, ed., 51).²⁷ However many women did not manage to learn. In this case, their education as southern ladies had created a superiority complex which prevented them from sympathizing with blacks, from working *with* them rather than *for* them. The only way out of it was to become close friends with black people, which happened quite often.

- 28 Prejudice also worked against white women insofar as they were systematically identified with the image of the southern lady, whatever their actual behavior, which could hinder their activism. White women had been put on a pedestal in the nineteenthth century, and the pedestal sometimes turned into a trap from which they could not escape. For instance, black women tended to resent white women as a group because they were part of the oppressive system that had discriminated against them for centuries (Olson 367-68). Besides, with the radicalization of the freedom movement and the rise of black power starting in 1965, white women were deemed hopelessly paternalistic just because they had been born white women. For instance, in a letter to her children, Frances Pauley remarked:

[T]he Negroes have shown me how awful paternalism is—so I hesitate to say—or think—that I want to be of service... But anyway I still do. [. . .] I know I am in a superior position because I am white. But that makes me feel inferior. I know I have hated my white skin many times, I could go—and maybe help work—if only I weren't white.

- 29 A few lines further she added:

Of course I must admit—at the moment I play my old lady with white hair to the hilt. It is my greatest protection. But also is my age and my position—Southern white gives me the worst possible position... (Pauley [n. d.])

- 30 So it seemed that the image of the southern lady, for all its usefulness, did not offer any acceptable solution in the struggle against southern racism: white guilt seemed inescapable.
- 31 Finally, the ideal of the southern lady was also a powerful instrument of control within the white community. It could be used by the segregationists as a means to maintain women in their subordinate role and to prevent them from challenging the existing order. Many women actually remained within the boundaries of respectable reform work. But many others did not and sometimes they paid a heavy price for it. In fact, in a significant number of cases, the involvement in the fight against segregation led to personal emancipation from gender norms as the women realized that they could not commit themselves fully to racial integration without violating the prescriptions of white southern womanhood.

- 32 For the older generation, the process was gradual and went along with the evolution of society and civil rights. Such was the case of Virginia Durr or Sara Parsons, for instance. Those women progressively came to reject the stereotype of the lady as their commitment to black equality deepened, but they only did so when the image clearly became an obstacle to their action. For instance, Sara Parsons, who, in her own words, had married as “a sweet southern girl,” gradually embraced the cause of school desegregation against her husband's will, which finally led her to repudiate her original status, and ultimately to get divorced (Parsons 1999, 18). In March 1964, she wrote in her diary:

It isn't that Ray objects to my being away from home so often. He objects to the fact that what I do is not on the “socially approved” list of what company executives' wives are supposed to do. Many of the approved activities are nothing more than time killers and status symbols. I need my energy and my time for the important things in life like brotherhood, peace, and justice for all, now especially. Besides, there is no way I can go back to the socially accepted proper “Southern Way of Life.” It is much too late. (Parsons 2000, 103-104)

- 33 One month earlier, she had related in another entry how she had resisted her mother's pressure to conform to social norms, and had commented: “I knew then that the way she wanted me to be—a properly dressed, socially prominent matron—wasn't me at all” (Parsons 2000, 102). Thus Parsons could only assert her integrationist principles by rejecting the norms of southern womanhood she was supposed to respect.
- 34 As for Virginia Durr, she was a typical member of the older generation of white women racial dissenters. Born in 1903 to a white middle-class family, raised as a perfect southern lady, she became involved in politics in the 1930s and devoted the rest of her life to social and racial equality. In her autobiography, published in 1985, she explains how the desegregation crisis led her to reject the social and gender norms she was expected to uphold. In 1954, Mississippi Senator James Eastland, chair of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, held a hearing in New Orleans for the purpose of proving that Durr and several other integrationists had close ties to the Communist Party.²⁸ The hearing was a turning point in Durr's life as she refused to answer Eastland's questions and openly voiced her contempt for his committee. Such an act of public defiance against a prominent politician was obviously not appropriate for a lady, and she partially lost the respectability she had so far benefited from in her community. Yet, she commented: “In a way, I was grateful that my cover as a nice, proper Southern lady was blown by the hearing, because then I could begin to say what I really thought” (Barnard, ed., 271). The experience of such women is a perfect illustration of the complex intertwining of gender and race in a segregationist culture.
- 35 For the younger generation, the rejection was more sudden as they joined the Freedom movement on reaching adulthood in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However the effect was by no means less painful. Dorothy Burlage's case is quite exemplary. Like her elders she was raised in Texas as a “southern lady”, but she joined the Civil Rights Movement against her family's will, and, in the process, became a feminist in spite of herself. Her marriage in late 1963 plunged her into an identity crisis, for she became torn between her wish to respect the norms she had been taught, which dictated her to become a perfect housewife, and her desire to carry on her militant activities as she had done so far. She finally freed herself from her native culture and got divorced in the process (Burlage 118). Another member of the younger generation, Casey Hayden, was led to realizing the limitations of “lady” activism when she openly challenged segregationist

rules by sitting in the “colored” section of the Albany courtroom during the trial of Freedom Riders in 1962. Unlike Burlage, Hayden was of a working-class background, but she was not immune to the influence of the ideal of white womanhood. She reports the scene in Albany when the police asked her and her husband to move back to the “white” section of the courtroom: “I hooked my legs under the bench so that they had to pry me out sideways.” But she adds: “Ever the young lady, I wore white gloves” (Hayden 347). However, the policemen's indifference to her appearance and manners obviously proves that the image of the lady had lost its effectiveness by 1962. So whatever their personal experiences, it can be said that by the 1960s, most of the “ladies” had turned into “women”, and many had come to realize what one of them, Eliza Paschall, finally put into words when she wrote around 1970: “the main problem of the Southern White Woman, quite seriously and with no malice, is the Southern White Man” (Paschall n. d., n. p.).

- 36 As a conclusion, it is clear that the stereotypical image of the southern lady as the guardian of segregationist culture was seriously undermined, if not shattered, by the white women who embraced the fight for racial equality. However, these women did not completely resolve a fundamental paradox that characterized them, which is that they liberated themselves from their native culture without ever rejecting this culture altogether. This is directly linked to the fact that they used the stereotype rather than repudiate it. It seems, actually, that they hardly had a choice, given the overwhelming power of the white supremacist and patriarchal doctrine that permeated their society. One consequence among others was that, although they emancipated themselves in the process of helping black people gain their freedom, southern white women remained distinctive from American women in the sense that most of them did not identify with the women's liberation movement. They continued to think that racial and social justice were more crucial than gender equality, which was obviously linked to the historic interconnection of race, gender, and class in southern society and culture.

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NOTES

1. This characteristic of southern culture grew out of the trauma caused by the Civil War. After Reconstruction, the white southern elite redefined southern identity by glorifying its past, by depicting the Civil War as the chivalric defense of a great civilization, and by presenting white southern womanhood as the incarnation of this civilization. The myths of the Old South and the Lost Cause thus pervaded southern culture for decades following the restoration of white supremacy in the region (Goldfield 4, Foster 172).
2. The most extreme manifestation of oppression of black men in the name of the protection of white womanhood was the spread of lynching in the region after the end of Reconstruction. See for instance Hall 129-57.
3. The author is currently writing such a study under the tentative title of *Unwilling Dissenters: White Southern Women in the Fight for Racial Justice in the South, 1920-1970*, to be published by the University Press of Florida.
4. It is difficult to assess the number of these women as they belonged to a great variety of reform organizations which were active in the South throughout the period studied. A major force in the struggle for racial equality between the 1920s and the 1960s was composed of Methodist churchwomen. According to historian Alice Knotts, their number amounted to more than 1,250,000 in the early 1950s (Knotts 1990, 251). These and churchwomen from other denominations were also very active in the YWCA which started to undermine segregation after World War II. Prior to the war, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), an all-white organization, had challenged white supremacy by denouncing the rationale which justified lynching as an act of chivalry meant to protect white southern womanhood from the alleged assaults of black men. By 1942, over 43,000 women had endorsed the ASWPL's anti-lynching pledge (Hall 179). As for the women who supported desegregation after the *Brown* decision of 1954, they were represented by associations such as Little Rock's Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, Atlanta's Help Our Public Education, and New Orleans's Save Our Schools, which respectively claimed more than 2,000, 30,000, and close to 1,200 members at their height (Murphy 211, Frystak 86, Bartley 333).

5. The terms “radical” and “liberal” have to be understood in the context of the segregationist South. Throughout the segregation era, such terms could not be dissociated from the racial issue. Whereas “liberal” and “liberalism” referred to a reformist position which condemned racial discrimination without calling for the immediate abolition of segregation, “radical” and “radicalism” applied to all individuals and groups who condemned segregation outspokenly and advocated direct confrontation with segregationist authorities to achieve total equality. Although other factors, such as one's position on communism and socialism, shaped the definitions of liberalism and radicalism in the region, race remained the major one until the 1960s. See Sosna ,viii.

6. The women I identify as the “older generation” of white female racial dissenters were born between the late 19th century and World War I and became involved in social and racial reform through church-related activities and women's organizations. Those of the “younger generation” were born in the 1930s and 1940s and joined the civil rights movement in their college years. While the older generation worked to reform the system without openly rejecting segregation, the younger one repudiated white supremacy on coming of age and directly confronted the system.

7. Such conservatism is well illustrated by the strong opposition to woman suffrage which could be observed in the southern states in the early 20th century and by the persistence of the image of the southern lady long after the ratification of the 19th Amendment (Taylor 279; Scott 1964, 298).

8. On white women and white supremacy at the turn of the 20th century, see for instance Foster or Gilmore.

9. For more information on the YWCA and racial reform during the desegregation era, see Lynn. On the involvement of Methodist women in racial reform between the 1920s and the 1970s, see Knotts 1996. For an account of the evolution of a southern League of Women of Voters, see Whitney.

10. The delegates who attended the organization's Constituting convention in Atlantic City adopted a statement in which they vowed to promote peace but also “to consecrate [themselves] to the task of building a democracy at home which recognizes individual worth and strives for justice to all the people” (Shannon 21).

11. See the committee's report, *To Secure These Rights*, for details. Another decisive move on the part of federal authorities was the 1944 *Smith v. Allwright* Supreme Court decision which declared unconstitutional the white primary elections barring blacks from participation in local and state elections in the southern states (*Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649, 1944).

12. *Brown v. Board of Education: Brown I*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), *Brown II* 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

13. For a detailed analysis of white resistance to desegregation, see Bartley.

14. For more information on HOPE, see Dartt; on WEC, see Murphy; on SOS, see Frystak.

15. In 1954, after the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional, the Georgia General Assembly proposed a referendum to amend the state constitution. The new text stipulated that state schools were to be segregated, and allowed state and local governments to fund private schools with tax money. In 1956 the Assembly passed laws allowing the governor to close all public schools if one school was desegregated as a result of the Supreme Court's decision (Dartt 9, 14). Then came the events of Little Rock (1957), and the closing of schools in Arkansas and Virginia (1958). Consequently,

in 1958, after a period of uncertainty in Georgia, a small group of whites (mostly women) met to find a way to prevent the destruction of the public school system. They called themselves HOPE for "Help Our Public Education".

16. See also Mississippians for Public Education, "A Time to Speak".

17. See for instance "Babies Are Fun," or "We Are a Family of Sailors".

18. The idea that women were freer to act than men because they were immune to economic retaliation is confirmed by several testimonies. See for instance Young 35, or Hall 76.

19. The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and the League of Women Voters provide illuminating examples of such action. See Hall and Whitney.

20. Indeed, several incidents had already occurred in connection with bus segregation in Montgomery and the idea of a boycott had been considered by the leaders of the black community before 1955, but they had waited for an exemplary case to launch their protest. Such a case came up when Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1 of that year. Rosa Parks was an activist, but her impeccable manners commanded respect so that she could not be accused of being a dangerous agitator. Thus, the leaders of the boycott used "her apparent conformity to pervasive middle-class ideals of chastity, Godliness, family responsibility, and proper womanly conduct and demeanor as codified in America's black and white media" to launch their protest movement (Chappell *et al.*, 87).

21. Numerous other examples corroborate the use of lady manners as a tactical device. See, for instance, Murphy 115, 117, on WEC.

22. On the use of anti-communism as an instrument of repression against southern integrationists in the 1950s and 1960s, see for instance Woods.

23. See also Frystak 86 on SOS, and Murphy 73-74 on WEC.

24. For a detailed account of the hearings, see Dartt 93-115.

25. Many women who worked for the implementation of the *Brown* decision in the mid- and late 1950s became the direct targets of white supremacists. Some, like Dorothy Tilly, received hate mail and anonymous phone calls at night (Riehm 39). Others, like Sarah Patton Boyle, woke up at night to find crosses burning in their yards (Boyle 253-54). Extremist segregationist groups also publicized the names and addresses of the people—mostly women—who organized interracial activities such as prayer meetings, thus encouraging local segregationists to harass them (Sullivan, ed., 168-71).

26. See Tilly's correspondence, reel 196, Southern Regional Council Papers.

27. Several other white women recall living exactly the same experience with black people who became their friends. See Boyle 107, Parsons 2000, 41, or Anne Braden in Fosl 87.

28. On Eastland and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, see Woods 5, 42-47, 107-111.

ABSTRACTS

The present article examines the paradoxical racial activism of the white women who supported school desegregation in the southern United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As southern segregationists organized massive resistance to the implementation of the 1954 Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, and violently repressed the supporters of desegregation, a number of white women who refused to sacrifice their moral ideals to the defense of white supremacy, used the image of respectability from which they benefited as “southern ladies” to undermine the segregationist system without seeming to do so. Thus, it can be argued that, on the surface, these women were moderate, even conservative, but that they were radical in depth. This strategy enabled them to ease the desegregation process by exerting their influence on their local white communities while the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Yet this “lady” activism also had obvious limitations as the ideal of the southern lady imposed constraints likely to confine these female dissenters within their traditional roles as the guardians of white supremacy. Ultimately, the road to racial integration inevitably entailed a repudiation of the ideal of white southern womanhood.

Le présent article étudie le militantisme paradoxal des femmes blanches qui apportèrent leur soutien à la déségrégation des écoles dans le Sud des États-Unis à la fin des années 1950 et au début des années 1960. À la suite de l'arrêt *Brown* de 1954, dans lequel la Cour Suprême déclara la ségrégation scolaire inconstitutionnelle, alors que les ségrégationnistes organisaient un mouvement de résistance massive et réprimaient violemment les partisans de la déségrégation, un certain nombre de femmes blanches, refusant de sacrifier leurs principes moraux à la défense de la suprématie blanche, utilisèrent l'image de respectabilité dont elles bénéficiaient en tant que “dames du Sud” pour saper les fondations du système ségrégationniste sans en avoir l'air. Ainsi peut-on qualifier ces femmes, en apparence, de modérées, voire de conservatrices, alors qu'elles étaient en réalité radicales. Cette tactique leur a permis de faciliter le processus de déségrégation en exerçant leur influence sur les communautés blanches locales tandis que le Mouvement pour les Droits Civiques s'amplifiait. Néanmoins, ce militantisme particulier souffrait de limites évidentes car l'idéal de la “dame du Sud” imposait des contraintes susceptibles de confiner ces femmes dans leur rôle traditionnel de gardiennes de la suprématie blanche. Ainsi l'engagement pour l'intégration raciale a-t-il entraîné une répudiation inévitable de l'idéal féminin sudiste.

INDEX

Keywords: United States, south, segregation / desegregation, white women, womanhood, Southern Lady, massive resistance, Brown decision

Mots-clés: sud, ségrégation / déségrégation, femmes blanches, États-Unis, résistance massive, arrêt Brown

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