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The cover of Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s excellent *Mothers of Massive Resistance* presents a familiar portrait of the southern desegregation drama. It depicts southern white women protesting the integration of William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. These “Cheerleaders,” as they came to be known, and their counterparts throughout the South, have often represented the female face of massive resistance; they are the snarling defenders of segregation in the public imagination. The picture is a bit of a ruse, though; much of McRae's study of massive resistance traverses far less familiar ground. While devoting adequate space to nasty scenes of Cheerleaders and other segregationist firebrands at work, she argues that such stereotypical representations obscure southern white women's more expansive—and far more important—role in both shaping and defending Jim Crow from the 1920s through the sixties era.

McRae, an associate professor of history at Western Carolina University, maintains that, in large part, women drove white southern resistance to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Their resistance, she insists, was an extension of the political and cultural work that southern white women had long performed in the interest of white supremacy and segregation. They carried out this work through local chapters of organizations like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Citizens’ Councils, in newspaper columns, and through political organizing. Although often speaking the language of white supremacy, well before the era of massive resistance, southern white women sprinkled their rhetoric with “color-blind” appeals in their attacks on the United Nations and federal education proposals. They saw both as Trojan horses designed to force national and international agendas onto southern schools and weaken the transference of white supremacist dogma into impressionable young white minds. Invoking their traditional role as mothers, many white southern women claimed that educational policy was their proper domain.

McRae shows linkages between white women's work in the South and the activities of conservative—typically segregationist—women throughout the country. In this way, the author demonstrates the centrality of female supporters of Jim Crow in the emergence of the New Right, illuminating their work as “segregation's constant gardeners,” helping to grow the movement well before World War II. Furthermore, she gives readers a new avenue for understanding segregation as a national, not a provincially southern, phenomenon. “By leaving segregationists sequestered in the South,” McRae observes, “scholars and policy
makers have attenuated massive resistance to its narrowest thread—absolute school segregation—and ignored the political flexibility of segregationists and the diverse strategies they employed” (p. 232).

McRae divides her book into two parts: “Massive Support for Racial Segregation, 1920-1941” and “Massive Resistance to the Black Freedom Struggle, 1942-1974.” The first section contributes to the historiography by elucidating southern white women’s efforts to build and maintain Jim Crow in both its de facto and de jure forms. In chapter 1, McRae offers a case study of two counties in western Virginia. She reveals the influential role of white female registrars, public welfare officers, and social work students in aiding the process of classifying the race of the state’s residents in accordance with Virginia’s Racial Integrity Law. In this way, “customary segregation, with the cooperation of grassroots women and the state, morphed into legal, long-lasting, local segregation” (p. 37).

Chapter 2 discusses the campaigns of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), and educator Mildred Lewis Rutherford for the adoption of textbooks and curricula bathed in Lost Cause and Dunning school Reconstruction attitudes—materials intentionally lacking in details of blacks’ historical contributions—in the interest of perpetuating white supremacist perspectives. McRae argues that these racist efforts resulted in consequences well beyond the South. “The textbooks for which Rutherford lobbied,” she writes, “helped tell that story to white schoolchildren across the nation, reinforcing the ‘naturalness’ of white over black” (p. 60).

Schools were not the only sites in which southern white women helped construct Jim Crow’s foundation. Chapter 3 introduces Mississippi newspaperwomen Florence Sillers Ogden and Mary Dawson Cain, and South Carolina activist Cornelia Dabney Tucker, all of whom appear frequently throughout the book. They were deeply involved in the interwoven webs of southern and national politics. While none of these women shared identical feelings or commitments to the New Deal or to the Democratic Party, they all frequently dressed their white supremacist ideas in color-blind rhetoric, “offer[ing] broader political platforms built on states’ rights, immigration restriction, a rejection of the New Deal state, or electoral reform” that put them in touch with a broader conservative movement that generally supported segregation but mostly avoided making explicitly white supremacist appeals (p. 83).

Chapter 4 centers on the work of North Carolina newspaper columnist Nell Battle Lewis. As a liberal, Lewis initially seems like a problematic choice for McRae’s study. After all, she read the NAACP’s magazine The Crisis, praised black poets like Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson, and decried lynchings of African Americans. But Lewis’s enthusiasm for white supremacy, McRae explains, was no weaker than those of white southerners who beat, hanged, and burned African Americans in extralegal spectacles. Through Lewis, McRae represents the diverse ways in which southern white women served the interwar segregationist power structure. An advocate of women’s political participation, Lewis “served the Jim Crow order by suppressing those that challenged the authority of liberal-minded, middle-class, educated white men and women” (p. 88). In her mind, “white apathy and white misuse of racial authority threatened the very system that guaranteed their political, economic, and cultural authority” (pp. 88-89). Lewis promoted a softer, but no less entrenched, version of racial paternalism (McRae dubs it “affectionate segregation”), built on her fantasies of subservient blacks akin to those found in the film The Birth of a Nation (1915) and the novel Gone with the Wind (1936), personal favorites of the columnist.

In the second part of her book, McRae directs her attention to the period of massive resistance.
She demonstrates considerable continuity with the earlier era. Chapters 5 and 6 detail the threats that southern white women segregationists perceived in the dozen years before the Brown decision. Concentrating again on the activities of Ogden, Cain, Tucker, and Lewis, McRae narrates southern white women’s increasing disaffection with the Democratic Party, especially one of its standard-bearers, Eleanor Roosevelt, whose racial liberalism they viewed as a direct threat to the southern way of life. Overall, southern segregationist women expanded their reliance on color-blind rhetoric, thus widening their message and its appeal outside the South. “In talking about the Democratic Party’s betrayal as a betrayal of states’ rights and an unconstitutional expansion of federal power,” McRae states, “segregationist women found that their ideas and politics appealed to organizations beyond those specifically committed to white over black, broadening the scope of their networks. With small steps, white southern segregationist women cultivated their ties to national conservative organizations, giving massive resistance a national audience” (p. 137). This effort, McCrae advances, was further augmented by white southern women’s embrace of antimunism and resistance to the educational material disseminated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They decried UNESCO as threatening American values and local educational standards. Southern white women increasingly felt that their male political leaders had “failed” them, forcing them “to become the first line of home defense against communist encroachment and increase their political authority on a local, state, and national level” (p. 164).

Of course, once the threat of desegregation became a reality, the work of “segregation’s constant gardeners” became all the more important—and sprawling. Although in the immediate aftermath of the Brown decision, the most vocal and visible activists took a hardline stance against integration, stressing that no black students should be allowed to enter white schools and even that public schools should be closed to combat the threat, moderates called for resistance balanced with accommodation. Regardless of their specific position, in “opening up their political ranks to those women who were not political activists but who were wary about losing authority over their families, Brown, in part, had feminized massive resistance” (p. 167). Using the language of states’ rights likewise “allowed conservative segregationist women to downplay the racist underpinnings of their political language and instead to continue in a more palatable Cold War discourse” (p. 175), putting white southern women in the forefront of postwar conservative political activism. Non-southern conservative allies would vocally defend such (mostly) deracialized principles.

In the years after the Supreme Court mandated that school desegregation proceed “with all deliberate speed,” McRae delineates, southern white women hardly slowed down in their segregationist ventures (chapter 8). Many of them participated in groups like the Citizens’ Councils, the Mothers’ League, Women for Constitutional Government, and Patriotic American Youth, while warning that southern society was being invaded by an out-of-control federal government. Female activists sometimes lived up to the stereotype of the venom-spewing southern segregationist, using explicitly racist appeals and shouting at black schoolchildren as they attempted to attend previously all-white schools. But “some segregationists,” McRae points out, “more quietly continued to emphasize a color-blind conservatism, cultivated their national conservative credentials, and retooled white supremacist politics for the long civil rights era. They built organizations that served to secure segregation where it has always been maintained—marriage and home, social welfare programs, schools, politics, and culture” (p. 197). McRae ably displays the similarity of southern white women’s and non-southern conservative white women’s espousal of a motherhood-based politics that opposed internationalism, decolo-
nization, attacks on school prayer, and implementation of sex education in schools. At the same time, she explains that these positions—and the political mobilizations that sustained them—were deeply rooted in white supremacist and segregationist thought.

McRae’s insightful, well-argued conclusion further highlights the connections between southern white women and wider conservative political networks, in this case, around the issue of busing in 1970s America. Here she asserts that labeling the opponents of school desegregation in Boston in the mid-seventies as “anti-busers” rather than “segregationists” papers over their white supremacist agenda as well as their promotion of attitudes and use of tactics strikingly similar to those of southern segregationist women. Perhaps McRae’s most vital contribution is her treatment of southern segregationists as part of a larger conservative political culture invested in preserving Jim Crow and “white over black” on a national level.

Overall, McRae’s work is excellent and well researched, but it has a few shortcomings. Despite McRae’s efforts to feature the specific actions of female members of the working class (usually she deals with them under the monolithic designator “working-class women”), for the most part, middle-class or affluent women, especially Ogden, Lewis, Cain, and Tucker, stand in for the whole of southern segregationist women. Also, the book leaves me wondering to what extent southern white women—beyond the likes of key individuals like Tucker and Cain—forged clear alliances with non-southern figures and organizations. McRae shows that these connections existed; still, I was hoping to learn more on “the broad and massive network of [conservative] women across the South and the nation” (p. 5). Finally, I am left wondering how much credit we should assign segregationist white women in the South for influencing conservative political trends nationally. Or did those non-southern conservatives simply arrive independently at those views on their own? Still, even if the latter is true, McRae is innovative in assigning southern segregationist women a role other than easily dismissed bigots—although she never forgets that they were bigots—as key players in the grassroots building of postwar conservatism.

Mothers of Massive Resistance is an essential addition to a recent branch of American historiography that downplays the distinctiveness of the southern experience and seeks to integrate southern history into the larger national narrative. McRae’s book is likely to endure as a work that helps to permanently transform our understanding of the relationship between the Jim Crow South and what she calls Jim Crow Nation, and the emergence of the New Right. McRae rightly calls the political mobilization of segregationist women in the South and elsewhere a women’s movement. These conservative women, previously unheralded in the historical literature, staked their claim as political actors, calling on their traditional—and powerful—role as mothers to express their views and exert influence on a host of political and cultural issues, while never completely disguising the fidelity to white supremacy that animated and joined together their various causes.
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