

Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy

Review Number: 2298

Publish date: Wednesday, 12 December, 2018

Author: Elizabeth Gillespie McRae

ISBN: 9780190271718

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £22.99

Pages: 368pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/mothers-of-massive-resistance-9780190271718?cc=gb&lan>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Emma Folwell

Elizabeth Gillespie McRae's *Mothers of Massive Resistance* tells the story of the grassroots resistance to racial equality undertaken by white women between 1920 and 1970. This book shows how massive resistance was, first and foremost, a grassroots movement driven by white women. McRae illustrates how, in defending and shaping white supremacy white women 'formed the foundation of a broader political platform informed by the Cold War, communism, housing policies, federal aid to education, tax reform and calls for limited government' (p. 3-4). *Mothers of Massive Resistance* captures the depth and complexity of massive resistance, and in doing so, illuminates the links between women's roles in support of white supremacy and in the development of national conservative organisations.

The book follows the activism of four white segregationist women in Mississippi, South and North Carolina, tracing their work shaping segregationism through social welfare policy, public education, electoral politics and popular culture. It is split into two sections: the first tracing 'massive support' for racial segregation from 1920-41, and the second on massive resistance to racial equality from 1942-74. McRae begins by rendering visible those women whose daily acts secured white supremacy. Capturing the work of women as activist mothers, teachers and guardians of whiteness, the author uncovers the roles of the women who have been rendered invisible in historical memory. In tracing the role of these 'local people in local communities' in preserving segregation, McRae dismantles 'the fiction that segregationism was natural and happened without workers' (p. 39). In chapter two, McRae traces white women's roles in shaping the education of their children in service of white supremacy. Their efforts were incredibly successful both in ensuring the 'almost complete erasure of black history and black Americans from Mississippi's textbooks' and in instructing 'white women on the eternal vigilance needed in maintaining public instruction in Jim Crow' (pp. 58-9).

Chapter three describes the role of white segregationist women in the political arena, exposing 'the diverse political organizations and paths available to those who supported white supremacy and revealed experimentation in the political languages employed to defend segregation' (p. 63). White women such as Florence Sillers Ogden 'forged networks of conservatives without directly invoking the white supremacist political order that their policies upheld' (p. 83). Chapter four traces the role of Nell Battle Lewis in North

Carolina as she shaped the culture of white supremacy through her newspaper columns, in what McRae terms 'Jim Crow storytelling'. Lewis' writing 'served the Jim Crow order by suppressing those that challenged the authority of liberal minded, middle class, educated white men and women' (p. 88), contributing to the creation of the myth of 'affectionate segregation' (p. 91). McRae illustrates the local variations in white supremacy across the Deep South. She describes how Lewis worked to shore up state pride and distinctiveness by contrasting North Carolina's segregationism with the brutal and unacceptable manifestations of white supremacy in Deep South states such as Alabama and Georgia.

Part two of the book tracks the development of massive resistance from 1942, beginning with the role of white women in post-war politics. Chapter five describes the role white women played in the shifting of partisan alliances, tracing the way they shaped a 'narrative of betrayal' first by Eleanor Roosevelt and then the Democratic Party as a whole. Segregationist women remained scattered across the political spectrum. But whatever their response to this Democratic betrayal, 'they recognized that it was in the 'everydayness' that racial identity gained meaning and in their grassroots efforts they translated post-war domestic and foreign policy into the most local and quotidian of outcomes' (p. 136). In chapter six, McRae shows how white segregationist women 'made common cause with conservative women' (p. 148) through 'the white supremacist message embedded in the anti-internationalism, anticommunism critique of the UN' (p. 164). By shaping the national opposition to UNESCO's teaching materials that undermined white supremacy, Southern segregationist women became 'part of a national, not a regional movement and their allies could be found in cities and suburbs from the Black Belt to the Sunbelt' (p. 150).

In chapter seven, McRae's focus on women recasts the familiar story of the post-*Brown* phase of massive resistance. She argues that the *Brown* ruling 'in part had feminized massive resistance' by opening up political ranks to women who were 'wary of losing authority over their families' (p. 167). In fact, *Brown* elevated women's positions 'as the most experienced proponents and sustainers of white supremacist thought in public education' (p. 183). McRae makes clear the links between these years of massive resistance and the 'vibrant segregationist conservative movement on a national level' (p. 188). Even as moderates made token concessions to racial integration, massive resistance continued. Women remained focused on shaping education and the transmission of a white supremacist ideology to the next generation. McRae's analysis not only recasts this familiar story of post-*Brown* resistance but also illustrates the relationship between whiteness, maternalism and identity. For Florence Sillers Ogden, *Brown* was not just a threat to white women's maternal influence, but a threat to the white supremacist politics that she believed was 'the very essence of American culture' (p. 202). McRae shows how white supremacy was woven into fabric of white motherhood, family values, politics, conservatism, identity and patriotism.

The conclusion traces the anti-busing campaigns of the 1970s when, the author argues, massive resistance became national and thus, truly massive. Far from drawing false dichotomies between de jure and de facto segregation, McRae shows that de facto segregation existed alongside de jure segregation in the South for decades. White segregationist women had been working to cultivate this de facto segregation through the culture of white supremacy as well as to maintain legal framework of Jim Crow. McRae also offers interesting thoughts on the terminology of the anti-busing protests of the 1970s. Labelling this protest 'anti-busing,' she suggests, perpetuates 'a false divide in the historiography' (p. 232). Anti-busing was not separate from massive resistance. Instead, the 'investment in property rights and parental rights expressed by northern white women' had much in common with white southern women's work to support and preserve segregation (p. 232).

McRae's book follows a number of works in recent years that have broadened and deepened our understanding of massive resistance. Kevin Kruse, Glenn Feldman, Jason Morgan Ward, Robert Luckett and Joseph Crespino have shown the vitality of massive resistance both before *Brown* and after 1965, within the South and outside the South.^[1] McRae illuminates the significance of the gendered nature of massive resistance, offering a nuanced and coherent description of the development of massive resistance across 50 years. She makes a very persuasive case that white women were central to shaping and preserving Jim Crow before 1941 and to forming and nationalising massive resistance in the post-war period. *Mothers of Massive Resistance*

shows how the actions of white segregationists and their connections to conservatism changed depending on time and space. At times, the white segregationist women McRae describes utilised the progressive state of the 1920s to shape segregation. The white supremacy of Nell Battle Lewis in North Carolina, for example, was not driven by 'anti-modernism or economic gain that drove her racial politics, but a Progressive era devotion to social reform, women's gendered contributions to society and modernity itself' (p. 92). McRae thus illustrates facets of white power that are often overlooked. White Southern women's actions show that white segregationism was not contrary to modernism or Progressivism, nor was it the product of an exceptional South. It interacted with the political developments of Progressivism, the New Deal and the growing influence of the Republican Party in complex ways that changed over time.

Another significant contribution of McRae's work is the grassroots relationship she illustrates between the women shaping massive resistance and the women who shaped an emerging national conservatism. The book illustrates the ways in which the segregationist language and tactics of white Southern women aligned with national conservative trends from the 1920s to the 1970s. Historians such as Lisa McGirr, Catherine Rymph and Michelle Nickerson have shown how women shaped modern conservatism, while others including Kim Phillips-Fein have noted that the roots of this conservatism can be found long before the 1960s.^[2] McRae contributes to both of these developments, illustrating the links between the mothers of both massive resistance and conservatism dating back to the 1920s. In doing so, this book demonstrates how the language of rights, individualism and parental authority has its origins in this world of massive resistance.

Perhaps most significantly, *Mothers of Massive Resistance* illuminates the power and agency of Southern white women. Constructed notions of white womanhood have long been described as central to Jim Crow. McRae illustrates that the preservation of that southern white womanhood and the Jim Crow world on which it drew depended on the activism of white women as 'the bodies of white women functioned as repositories of Jim Crow's rules' (p. 115). White womanhood, as McRae describes, was not passive or just something to be protected and defended by white men. Rather, white southern womanhood instilled women with power. 'Constructions of white womanhood denied the possibility of a white woman's desire for black men while simultaneously making such desire an act of political sabotage on the Jim Crow system by a "bad" white woman... In racializing womanhood, white women embodied a political system that elevated whiteness and imbued women with political power based on their exclusions of African Americans' (p. 115).

Mothers of Massive Resistance touches on some interesting issues that bear further exploration. There is a discussion of the transnational dimension of white supremacy in part two. McRae shows how opposition to internationalism and the UN in the late 1940s shaped segregationist language and provided a common platform with national conservatives, as did opposition to decolonization in the 1960s. However, it would be fascinating to see how such transnational dimensions of white supremacy played out in the inter-war years. It is clear that 'racial science' was utilized to great effect by segregationists, for example, but there was little discussion of how the use of eugenics was shaped by events or people outside of the US. Likewise, McRae's analysis of the gendered nature of massive resistance indicates that much work remains to expose the relationship between class and segregationism. There is discussion of some white working class women, particularly in the anti-busing campaign. However, the focus in this book is somewhat limited to middle class women.

There could have been a little more clarity on the nature of the connection between white Southern segregationist women and the national streams of conservatism. Were the contributions of these women distinctively Southern? McRae draws a distinction between white Southern segregationist women and national conservative women who were segregationist. It would have been interesting to see a discussion of how segregationism was different – or was expressed differently – in these locations. While McRae clearly illustrates the national character of massive resistance, the four women she focuses on are all based in the South. The inclusion of a non-southern segregationist woman could perhaps have provided an additional perspective on the national massive resistance. The book could have benefitted from a little further justification of the timeframe, particularly the starting point. The nationalising of massive resistance in the anti-busing campaigns makes the 1970s a natural end-point, but the narrative jumps after chapter eight thus

overlooking the important developments of massive resistance in the mid- and late-1960s.

Mothers of Massive Resistance offers fascinating insights into massive resistance, drawing on a comprehensive exploration of the grassroots activism of white Southern women. McRae provides a convincing description of a gendered massive resistance that stretched from at least the 1920s and into the 1970s. Her approach – following the work of four women in thematic chapters – makes for a compelling narrative that illuminates the complexity and endurance of white supremacy.

[1] Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton, NJ, 2005), *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2004), Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), Robert E. Lockett Jr., *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement*, (Jackson, MS, 2017) and Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, (Princeton, NJ, 2007).

[2] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: the Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton, NJ, 2001), Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Post-War Right*, (Princeton, NJ, 2012), Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, (London, 2009).

Other reviews:

H-Net

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/512/reviews/1904094/lechner-gillespie-mcrae-mothers-massive-resistance-white-women-and> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2298>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298726>

[2] <https://networks.h-net.org/node/512/reviews/1904094/lechner-gillespie-mcrae-mothers-massive-resistance-white-women-and>