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***White Women and the Fight for Equality in the Southern
United States (1920-1964) :
A Specific Brand of Activism***

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From the adoption of the first state segregation laws in the 1890s, to the passage of the Civil Rights Act by the United States Congress in 1964, the doctrine of white supremacy permeated society and culture in the southern United States¹. For a long time in the 20th century, because the social and political elite of the region remained adamant in its defense of segregation and its hostility to reform, the white South was perceived as solidly supportive of its racist institutions. Although, in the last three decades, significant scholarship has contributed to qualifying the image of a solid, conservative, white South, by throwing light on the work of white dissenters in the midst of the segregation era, this segment of the white southern population is still not well known to the public². Unlike the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, that was led and popularized by charismatic male black leaders, the struggle for civil rights that preceded it was mostly led by white reformers, among whom women played a disproportionately important role, not always acknowledged as such. The primary aim of the present article is to draw attention to these women, born between the late 19th century and World War II, who dedicated their adult lives to social and racial justice at a time when inequality and racism were the law. Obviously, white women were not alone in their actions. They often worked with black women, as well as with black and white male reformers. Yet,

¹ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited segregation in all public places across the United States.

² See, for example, Dunbar, Anthony, P. *Against the Grain : Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1981 ; Reed, Linda, *Simple Decency and Common Sense : The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991 ; Egerton, John, *Speak Now Against the Day : The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, New York, Knopf, 1994 ; Sullivan, Patricia, *Days of Hope : Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

space being limited, the article will focus on this particular group so that its contribution to reform may be better recognized and connected to that of others.

The history of this peculiar brand of activism is characterized by a steady process of radicalization, from the first efforts at interracial cooperation within the frame of segregation in the 1920s, to the students' universal brotherhood of the 1960s. For the sake of analysis, the period studied can be divided into a pre-World War II and a post-World War II era. The first part of the article will show that up to the 40s, white women reformers were indeed activists of a very special kind, as they did not defy segregation in an open way, but used their privileged status of « southern ladies » to undermine the system from within. In the second part, it will be argued that from the early 40s on, as the integrationist movement grew, many white women proved less compromising than their male counterparts, and eventually came to repudiate their role of « southern ladies » in the fight against segregation. Indeed, for many of them, the fight for racial equality went along with a rejection of the patriarchal norms that had been imposed on them through the culture of segregation.

The nature of white women's activism in the 20th-century South cannot be grasped without good knowledge of the context in which they lived. At the turn of the 20th century, the region still had not overcome the trauma of the Civil War and its consequences. After the end of Reconstruction, segregation had been institutionalized in the former slave states, to restore the white supremacy that had been theoretically abandoned with the abolition of slavery and the granting of citizenship to African Americans³. The restoration of white supremacy went along with a rewriting of history depicting the Civil War as a lost cause, and the Old South as an ideal society, of which the « southern lady » was a sacred figure to be eternally honored and protected. The white woman, because of her mothering role, was indeed viewed as the guardian of the white race, and as such, she had to be protected from any contact with black men. She was thus put on a pedestal by white men, who pledged themselves to fight for her purity⁴. In the segregationist South, lynchings became an efficient means to remind black men of their status, as the murders were usually committed to protect « white southern womanhood » from alleged rape⁵. The point is that, given the distinctive features that characterized southern society in the early 20th century, the status of white women could not be dissociated from the race issue, which had direct consequences on their involvement in reform. While many simply went on conforming to traditional norms, those who engaged in reform did so in a quiet way, using channels outside of politics⁶.

Up to the 1940s, white southern female activism manifested itself through all-female, church-related groups. Most of these women belonged to the middle and upper class, and remained within the bounds of respectability as « southern ladies ». Yet they often found themselves at odds with their male-dominated institutions, and laid the groundwork for the following generations of activists.

In the first decades of the 20th century, Methodist women, who could not occupy positions in the clergy, focused their efforts on social work, in particular providing relief

³ The South considered here was formed by the ex-slave states that seceded from the Union in 1861 and were defeated in the Civil War that followed. Slavery was abolished by the Federal Government in 1865.

⁴ Scott, Anne F., *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, 1970, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1995 ; Hall, Jacquelyn D., *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*, rev. ed., New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁵ See Hall, *op. cit.*, 150-157.

⁶ Young, Louise, interviewed by Jacquelyn Hall, Feb. 14, 1972, interview G-0066, Southern Oral History Program Collection (# 4007), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, p. 59.

and education for poor and black people⁷. In doing so, they were sometimes led to violate the segregationist etiquette, as they cooperated with black women on the local level. Although paternalism prevailed among reformers at that time, some white Methodist women encouraged real cooperation, thus pointing to new directions in race relations. Thelma Stevens, who served as director of the Bethlehem Center in Augusta, Georgia, in the 20s and 30s, stressed the importance of working with, rather than for, black people⁸. Stevens probably was an exception, but she credited her teacher Louise Young for helping « hundreds of young women get new concepts of the meaning of working with people », thus implying that the trend for real cooperation could already be felt⁹. The women actually operated quite independently from the Methodist Church's authorities controlled by men¹⁰. They happened to be bolder in their commitment to reform, and in particular in their attitude to segregation¹¹.

Just like the Methodist women, the members of the Young Women's Christian Association—who sometimes happened to be the same persons—were more committed to reform than their male counterparts of the Young Men's Christian Association¹². In the early 20th century, the national YWCA worked at overcoming racial, economic and social divisions, and more specifically focused its attention on women workers. In the South, even though segregation rules applied, local YWCA women managed to connect across class, and to a lesser degree, race lines. For many white women students, YWCA programs that put them in direct contact with industrial workers, or/and with black women, acted as epiphanies, leading them to challenge social and cultural norms afterwards¹³.

Out of the religious networks born in the first decades of the 20th century emerged a typical brand of « respectable » activism that found a new vehicle in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, in 1930. Led by Jessie Daniel Ames, the association acted against lynchings by rejecting the rationale that justified them as the best means to defend « white southern womanhood » from black men. Their action consisted in exerting direct pressure on local sheriffs to make sure they enforced the law by preventing extra-legal violence whenever it threatened to happen. The historian of the ASWPL, Jacquelyn Hall, emphasizes that church women, notably from Methodist groups, were the main supporters of the organization¹⁴.

Far from repudiating their status as « southern ladies », those women actually used it to assert their moral authority by arguing that they were in no way threatened by black men and by refusing to be used as a pretext by white men to justify murder. At first sight, such women could indeed be judged conservative, especially according to national standards, as they conformed to traditional gender norms of behavior, and did not seek the contribution of black women, who had done much in the past decades to

⁷ See Scott, Anne F., « After Suffrage : Southern Women in the Twenties », *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 30, n°3, Aug., 1964, (pp. 298-318) p. 309, Scott, *Southern Lady*, pp. 143-144, or Hall, *op. cit.*, pp.71-74.

⁸ Bethlehem House was a community center for Blacks built by the Methodist Church in 1914.

⁹ Stevens Thelma, interviewed by Jacquelyn and Bob Hall, Feb. 13, 1972, interview G-0058, Southern Oral History Program, pp. 23-24, 29-30.

¹⁰ Young, *op. cit.*, p.36.

¹¹ See, for example, Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36 ; Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

¹² See Roydhouse, Marion W., « Bridging Chasms : Community and the Southern YWCA », *Visible Women : New Essays on American Activism*, Hewitt, Nancy A. and Suzanne Lebsack, eds., Urbana & Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 1993, pp. 270-295. See also Young's testimony, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-73.

¹³ The example of Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin is illuminating. See her memoir, *The Making of a Southerner*, 1946, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1991, pp. 187-193, 211-215. See also Stevens, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17.

¹⁴ Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-180.

turn lynching into a national issue¹⁵. Yet, the rejection of the white supremacist rationale for lynching undermined a key feature of southern culture, the blending of sexual and racial constructs to keep both black men and white women under control¹⁶. From this perspective, the anti-lynching association was indeed quite subversive.

The reappropriation by white women of the figure of the southern lady was a common feature of the pre-World War II reformers, be they working for racial or economic equality. The majority of them being part of the middle and upper classes, they also used their privileged social position to their profit, as it was more difficult for men to oppose women born into prestige and respectability. Patricia Sullivan describes Lucy Randolph Mason, who first worked as industrial secretary for the Richmond YWCA, and then represented the Congress of Industrial Relations in the South, as the « quintessential southern lady »¹⁷. Edith Holbrook Riehm uses exactly the same terms to depict Dorothy Tilly, adding the words « aristocratic, genteel, soft-spoken, well-dressed, Christian, and white » to complete the picture¹⁸. Tilly was definitely the best incarnation of pre-World War II white female activism. The daughter of a Methodist minister, she worked for the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, became a member of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation¹⁹, then a leader of the ASWPL, and went on fighting for integration from the late 40s on. She was married to a reform-minded businessman, who encouraged her to act in ways that he himself could not afford for economic reasons²⁰. Yet, even if her profile perfectly fits the definition of the earlier generation of activists, Tilly can by no means be reduced to this category. She indeed shared many features with later white women who became involved in the integrationist movement from the 40s on.

World War II was a watershed in southern history, for it triggered off open protest against segregation in the South. As the United States became involved in the fight against Nazism and fascism abroad, American leaders could no longer sanction the institutional racism imposed by the southern states. Segregation became the central issue in the South. While a crushing majority of the white leaders united in their defense of segregation as the « southern way of life », a small minority of white liberals and radicals joined the interracial groups that paved the way for the Freedom Movement of the 60s. Many of the women who had quietly struggled for social and racial justice within the frame of segregation became key actors in the new interracial organizations that now challenged southern institutions.

The late 30s witnessed the convergence of regional liberal and radical groups that had grown out of the Great Depression and the New Deal. The best illustration of this was the creation, in 1938, of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, with the support of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt²¹. The Conference gathered a wide array of

¹⁵ Olson, Lynne, *Freedom's Daughters : The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001, p. 47. The pioneer in the crusade against lynching was the black journalist Ida B. Wells. See Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-80.

¹⁶ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. xx.

¹⁷ Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁸ Riehm Edith Holbrook, « Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned », *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege : White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era*, Murray, Gail S., ed., Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2004 (pp. 23-48) p. 26.

¹⁹ The CIC, formed in 1919, mainly tried to prevent racist violence without challenging segregationist institutions. It was superseded by the Southern Regional Council in 1944.

²⁰ See Riehm, *op. cit.*

²¹ For more information, see Reed, *op. cit.*

middle-class, black and white reformers bent on democratizing southern society²². From the first meeting in 1938 to the death of the SCHW in 1948, women were not only visible but active in the organization. Lucy Mason, along with Judge Louise Charlton, was among the initiators of the founding conference. Josephine Wilkins, president of Georgia's League of Women's Voters, was an original sponsor²³. Lillian Smith, an integrationist writer and editor of the *North Georgia Review*, was elected to the board in 1942²⁴. Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the National Council of Negro Women, was also on the board. As the SCHW focused its action on campaigning for the abolition of the poll tax—an electoral tax that was used in the South, among other devices, to prevent black people from voting—Virginia Foster Durr, a key member of the organization, led the lobbying fight in Washington²⁵. She then became a staunch integrationist, supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott, became friends with Rosa Parks, and helped the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, mainly by building bridges between white and black southerners, and between northerners and southerners when northern help was needed to overcome white resistance to desegregation²⁶.

Along with the SCHW, a number of interracial organizations, still dominated by Whites, struggled for race equality in the 40s and 50s. Some, like the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, founded in 1936, Highlander Folk School, started in 1932, or the Southern Conference Educational Fund, formed in 1946 as an outgrowth of the SCHW, were viewed as radical because they adopted a clear integrationist stance from the start. Others, like the Southern Regional Council, did not openly condemn segregation before 1951, and remained focused on education and communication rather than advocating immediate change. It is not easy to assess the role played by women in these groups, as they became obviously less visible, once working with men, than they had been at the time of all-female groups. What is sure is that many of them occupied executive positions in all the liberal and radical groups of their time. Dorothy Tilly, for instance, was on the SRC's board, as was Josephine Wilkins, who had worked for the SCHW. Nelle Morton served as executive secretary for the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen from 1945 to 1950, while Lillian Smith and her friend Paula Snelling were also active members of the organization²⁷. Anne Braden was a key figure in SCEF up to 1974²⁸. Besides, it is worth noting that when recalling their experiences, most of these women mention many others who worked behind the scenes without being credited for it²⁹. Parallely, the tradition of all-female groups was perpetuated by the Leagues of Women Voters across the region. Although they did not specifically focus on segregation, they played their part in the awakening of women's political consciousness. Indeed, after the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional in the *Brown* decision of 1954, and, in 1955, ordered the states to desegregate their schools “with all deliberate

²² Reed, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

²³ Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 22 ; Wilkins, Josephine, interviewed by Jacquelyn Hall, 1972, interview G-0063, Southern Oral History Program, pp. 27-37.

²⁴ Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁵ Reed, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67, 70, 72 ; Hollinger, F. Barnard, ed., *Outside the Magic Circle : The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1985, pp. 126-134, 152-170.

²⁶ See Barnard, *op. cit.*, and Sullivan, Patricia, ed., *Freedom Writer : Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

²⁷ Morton, Nelle, interviewed by Dallas A. Blanchard, June 29, 1983, interview F-0034, Southern Oral History Program, pp. 54-55.

²⁸ Fosl, Catherine, *Subversive Southerner : Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 201-209, 320-321.

²⁹ See Morton *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 61.

speed”³⁰, the Leagues fought the segregationist state politicians who wanted to close the public schools rather than desegregate them³¹.

Actually, in the post-World War II era, white women often proved more radical than their male counterparts in their commitment to change. Yet, unlike the women of the earlier generation, they could no longer rely on their status as « southern ladies » as a protection from reprisals. Anne Braden, for instance, was harassed by the local authorities of Louisville, Kentucky, after she and her husband helped a black couple to buy a house in an all-white area ; Virginia Durr was accused of communism and subpoenaed by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in the years of McCarthyism. Indeed, the debate over segregation radicalized after the *Brown* decision. While many liberal men retreated into « moderation » and did not call for the immediate implementation of the decision for fear of violence, many women intensified their struggle and joined Blacks in the modern Civil Rights Movement. It can be argued that their previous experience of activism led them to question southern culture much more deeply than white men, by forcing them, in particular, to challenge, and ultimately to reject, the specific gender norms that white supremacy had imposed on them. So that, when the black leaders and students launched the final assault on segregation in the South, they were ready to follow.

Even if the fight for integration after the *Brown* decision had hardly anything to do with the missionary work of the early 20th century, the church women remained a driving force for change at that time. Dorothy Tilly gradually adjusted to the evolution of the race issue, to fully embrace the cause of integration by the late 40s. Yet, she remained attached to a non-confrontational approach, based on persuasion and education. In 1949, she created the Fellowship of the Concerned, an interracial group of church women, who started exerting moral pressure on southern courts so that they stopped discriminating against Blacks. From 1953 on, the FOC concentrated its efforts on persuading Whites to accept school desegregation. For all its moderation, her position was unacceptable to white supremacists, who harassed her for her views, as they persecuted all southern dissenters at the time³².

With the rise of the integrationist movement, the regional churches alienated a growing number of their members, namely women and students. The women’s networks that had paved the way for interracial cooperation did not disappear after World War II. They actually became involved in the controversy over desegregation. The issue was divisive, and churchwomen’s groups were far from unanimous in their attitudes. Yet, whereas, in the previous decades, for all their good will, white women had only exceptionally managed to overcome their paternalistic bias, some now organized truly equalitarian projects and meetings with black women on a local level, usually stirring the hostility of their communities³³. The women often acted against the will of their local churches in doing so. The growth of integrationist activism thus favored the development of biracial networks, no longer based on paternalism but on true cooperation.

In the same period, the student Christian movement—including all the major denominations as well as the student YM and YWCA—took momentum, openly

³⁰ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294, 1955.

³¹ See, for example, Pauley, Frances, interviewed by Jacquelyn Hall, July 18, 1974, interview G-0046, Southern Oral History Program, pp. 12-24, Wilkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-27, Parsons, Sara Mitchell, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights : The Memoir of a White Civil Rights Activist*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2000, pp. 18-26.

³² Riehm, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-35.

³³ See, for instance, Virginia Durr’s testimony, in Barnard, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-245.

criticizing the Church, and asking for meaningful action in the face of social injustice³⁴. This movement supported racial integration on campuses, inspiring large numbers of young women whose lives were transformed by their college experiences. According to the historian Sara Evans, who interviewed many of them, virtually all southern white women who became involved in the Freedom Movement of the 1960s came to it through the church³⁵. The black and white women they met on campus YWCAs, especially, served as role models to them³⁶.

The significant number of white southern female students who joined the Civil Rights Movement did so at the cost of repudiating their southern education in the name of Christian brotherhood. The choices they made at that point in their lives implied a rejection of the codes of behavior that had been imposed on them in their youths. This was a radical step to take, which turned them into « traitors » to their communities. The most subversive aspect of their action was their immersion into a movement dominated by black men, with whom intimate relationships became an actual possibility. In other words, when they engaged in the new form of activism adopted by the nonviolent movement, these white women shattered the image of the southern lady that had conditioned generations. In doing so, they eventually completed the process of radicalization that had been going on since the 30s³⁷.

In conclusion, this survey of white, southern, female activism in the segregation era should not be misleading: for all their achievements, the women studied here constituted a small minority of the white population. They were dissenters, even outcasts at times. Yet, they definitely played their part, along with other dissenters, in the dismantling of the segregationist system. Thus, their contribution should not be considered in isolation from that of other activists, but as a complement to it. The caution that most of them displayed in their actions could be interpreted as a form of conservatism. In the context of the segregationist South, however, for a white woman to socialize with Blacks at the cost of being rejected by her family and ostracized by her community was definitely radical. Such an act simply took a remarkable amount of courage, and they deserve full recognition for it.

³⁴ Evans, Sara M., ed., *Journeys That Opened the World : Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2003, pp. 1-8.

³⁵ Evans, Sara, *Personal Politics : The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, New York, Knopf, 1979, pp. 30-35.

³⁶ See, for example, Burlage, Dorothy Dawson, « Truths of the Heart », *Deep in Our Hearts : Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*, Curry, Constance, Joanne Browning, et al., Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2000, pp. 95-96 ; Hayden Casey, « Fields of Blue », Curry et al., *op. cit.*, p. 338.

³⁷ See, for instance, « Rebecca Owen », Evans, *Journeys*, pp. 75-76.