

The Women Behind White Power

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Few Americans know the name Cornelia Dabney Tucker, but the Jim Crow South would not have been the same without her.

After the Supreme Court issued its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, ending public-school segregation, Senator James Eastland, the cigar-smoking chairman of the Senate Judicial Committee, turned to Mrs. Tucker to help aid him in his two-pronged assault on the decision. While Mr. Eastland wielded his chairmanship to counter civil rights, delaying, for example, the 1967 vote to confirm Thurgood Marshall, the first black Supreme Court justice, he counted on Mrs. Tucker to organize grass-roots opposition. And organize she did: She marched outside the court, wrote letters and lobbied legislators, civic organizations, women's groups and conservative coalitions to protest an "activist" judicial branch. All the while, she modeled how to emphasize issues like constitutional overreach and the "alarming march of communism" while playing down racial segregation.

Mr. Eastland today is remembered as one of the country's leading opponents to integration; until 2012, the law library at the University of Mississippi was named after him. Mrs. Tucker, however, has faded into history.

An element of surprise still animates discussions about white women supporting white supremacist politics. In part, it's because the narrative of white supremacist history in the United States is not immune to the same sexist forces that have shaped so many of our national historical narratives: It has left out the women. And that has consequences for how we think about these politics today.

As is the case with so much of history, stories about the nation's racism have focused on the dramatic, not the daily, on the speechifiers, not the low-level campaigners: In school, we study Klan violence and elected officials like Mr. Eastland and Governor George Wallace of Alabama.

But it is the mundane and the persistent that make movements. Often, this work is done by women who are later overlooked; in the case of the civil rights struggle, for instance, women like Jo Ann Robinson and Georgia Gilmore fund-raised for and organized the Montgomery bus boycott. Their efforts, however, have often been eclipsed by stories emphasizing the rise of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In minimizing the grass-roots work of women, the framing of white supremacist politics was no different. Just as Ms. Robinson and Ms. Gilmore led the 1955-56 boycott

of buses in Alabama, in the 1970s, women like Louise Day Hicks led the antibusing crusades in the North, in an effort to avoid the desegregation of Boston public schools. While men debated in legislative chambers and listened to challenges on the bench, women headed to school cafeterias, playgrounds and PTA meetings, doing the bulk of the behind-the-scenes work of supporting the politics of segregation. White women organized precinct gatherings to pressure their politicians to uphold Jim Crow laws. They transformed their homes into centers of bureaucratic efficiency — copying fliers, assigning neighborhoods for petition drives and scheduling protest shifts at elementary schools and bus garages.

It was also women who shaped the way segregation, white supremacy and ideas about racial identity were knitted into the fabric of their communities. Working as midwives, teachers and social workers, women policed the racial identity of babies, students and clients to ensure that the dividing line between white and black remained intact. And across the nation, women-led groups like Patriotic American Youth and the Women for Constitutional Government and Pro America spread the message to the next generation that opposition to racial equality was about states' rights and limited government, not white supremacy.

If narratives about white supremacy have been shaped by the overwhelmingly masculine lens through which we examine practically all political movements, there are also aspects of white supremacy that make it different. One critical factor here is the central role ascribed to white male sexual and status anxiety and lust for dominance in fomenting organized white-supremacist activities. As part of arguments against desegregation, many who belonged to these movements embraced a narrative that saw white women and girls as vulnerable (to black men), and white men as protectors — a story line that simultaneously elevated white men and rendered women helpmates and beneficiaries, not activists.

But this broader narrative obscures and even gives cover to the ways white women sometimes used white supremacy for their own gain. The suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt in the early 20th century argued for women's voting rights in Southern states on the basis that "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by white women's suffrage." In the 1920s, the journalist Nell Battle Lewis of North Carolina never questioned the absolute need for racial segregation even as she criticized the violence committed in the name of Jim Crow. Staying in the racial fold, she was afforded the opportunity to blast her state's regressive labor and gender politics. Being a white supremacist, even a liberal one, meant that she remained part of the conversation. The point, here, is neither to catalog nor to celebrate white women's contributions to white supremacist politics. Instead, their work should change how we understand history. It is easy to denounce the racist pronouncements and white-supremacist politics of a George Wallace or a Roy Moore. But what white women teach us is that

white-supremacist politics is sustained at a much more grass-roots level by our neighbors, school boards and even friends. White women have made white supremacy a much more formidable and long-lasting force in American society, sustaining it at both the local and national levels.

Today, it seems, the story America prefers to tell itself about white supremacy has changed little since the middle of the century: Instead of Klan lynchings, we focus on the rally in Charlottesville; instead of George Wallace, we focus on Jeff Sessions or, for that matter, Donald Trump. Outrage over the violence and rhetoric of these men buries an equally important and certainly more intransigent story of longstanding grass-roots and national campaigns populated partly by white women who aim to maintain racial and economic inequities on the American landscape. If we begin to consider their staying power with seriousness rather than surprise — a surprise not shared by black women — perhaps we can more effectively prepare to counter this strand of American politics.