

OF “OUTSIDE AGITATORS”, “PECULIAR WHITES”, AND “POOR EXCUSES FOR WHITE WOMEN”: THE CHARACTER ASSASSINATIONS OF WHITE SOUTHERN FEMALE CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS IN THE 1960s

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ABSTRACT *This paper argues that White female civil rights activists were subjected to character assassination and that these attacks drew much of their effectiveness from mobilizing the gendered and racialized cultural norms that structured sociopolitical life in the Jim Crow South during the 1960s. Focusing on a cohort of White Southern women born in the 1930s and early 1940s, the study analyzes press portrayals in White Southern newspapers. The findings demonstrate that such attacks operated in subtle and indirect ways rather than through overt denunciations. By embedding regional social and cultural codes within seemingly objective reporting, the White Southern press mobilized racialized and gendered tropes that discredited the women while minimizing White Southern participation in the Civil Rights Movement. This strategy allowed the press to undermine the activists' legitimacy while maintaining the appearance of journalistic neutrality.*

KEYWORDS

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, GENDER, CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, PRESS, ACTIVISM

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INTRODUCTION

On March 7, 1960, Mississippi Governor Ross R. Barnett addressed the audience at a White Citizens' Council rally in New Orleans with a fiery, even militant speech. He called for unity among White Southerners and their "total mobilization" in the "mortal struggle" against the "race mixers," "modern-day Carpetbaggers," "do-gooders [,and] social agitators" threatening to destroy the status quo of White racial dominance (Barnett, 1960, pp. 3–6). Only five weeks earlier, on February 1, four Black students – Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and David Richmond, from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College – staged a consequential sit-in at a Woolworth department store's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. In the following days and weeks, their actions inspired numerous adolescents and young adults to organize and conduct similar protests throughout the South (Chafe, 1980, pp. 98–141; Morgan, 2012, pp. 1–19). Thus, the student-dominated phase of the Civil Rights Movement commenced, putting significant pressure on the Southern states and the federal government to abolish the so-called Jim Crow system of racial terror, discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement. In light of these circumstances, Barnett's allegations were a deliberate effort to damage the character and credibility of civil rights activists.

Since the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, racist demagogues such as Barnett emerged as leading proponents of massive resistance, a Southern political strategy that opposed federal integration measures and instrumentalized state law to circumvent civil rights reform, thereby fostering a political climate that encouraged mob intimidation and racial terrorism (Webb, 2005a, pp. 4–8). In his speech, Barnett predominantly used an "Us v. Them" rhetoric, creating mental images of White law-abiding Southerners heroically defending the presumed God-given social order against demonized "left-wing" Black and White non-Southerners, invading the region, promoting interracial sex, and threatening the Southern way of life. To some extent, Barnett did acknowledge that the threat to White racial superiority could also come from within the White South. "We must identify the traitors in our midst," he proclaimed, advocating for vigorous actions against them (1960, p. 7). Although his fearmongering primarily stoked trepidations about an alleged threat posed by Black and White men coming South and endangering the racial purity of Southern White women – and, by extension, the racial integrity of the White South – some of the seemingly inconspicuous "inside agitators" were, in fact, the very individuals he claimed to protect: White Southern women.

This article argues that White female civil rights activists were the targets of character assassination campaigns. It further contends that these campaigns derived much of their persuasive power from mobilizing – albeit often in subtle and veiled ways – the gendered and racialized cultural norms that structured sociopolitical life in the Jim Crow South. Character assassination, as defined by Eric B. Shiraev, Jennifer Keohane, Martijn Icks, and Sergei A. Samoilenko (2022, p. 10), refers to the intentional attack on an individual's reputation and credibility. Such attacks can be profoundly personal and typically focus on specific actions, statements, or behaviors that the targeted individuals are alleged to have engaged in. Rather than addressing isolated incidents alone, character

assassination aims to construct a much broader narrative that questions the individual's moral integrity and supposedly reveals a flawed or deviant essence that defines who they are. Because character assassination can be closely tied to socially ascribed norms of appropriate conduct, it is inherently intertwined with gender. Gendered forms of character assassination frequently target the moral dimensions of a person's behavior or lived experience. Such personal attacks typically operate through accusations that the targeted individuals violate assumed standards of proper gendered and, in this historical context, racialized behavior (Shiraeve et al., 2022, pp. 7–8, 222–224).

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of studies have focused on White Americans' massive resistance against the advancement of racial equality (Brückmann, 2021; McRae, 2018; Katagiri, 2014; Webb, 2005b). Still, except for the works by historian Kenneth O'Reilly (1989) and David J. Garrow (1981) on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) attacks on Martin Luther King Jr., the character assassination of civil rights activists has rarely been a topic of interest within the broader civil rights historiography. The article expands the existing civil rights scholarship with a study on the character assassinations of a cohort of White Southern female civil rights activists, who belonged to the generation of young adult and student activists that was formative for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. They rejected the region's racist as well as patriarchal laws and norms, declared their solidarity with People of Color, and joined them in the struggle to dismantle the Jim Crow system.

This historical case study of gender-based character attacks offers crucial insight into the complex culture in which the Civil Rights Movement emerged and against which it contended. First, examining the women's civil rights activism through the lens of White Southerners' responses reveals the fundamental challenges their actions posed to the central tenets of White patriarchal racism in the South (Lewis, 2012, pp. 41–42). Due to the intricate association of White womanhood with the South itself, any closeness between a White woman and a Black man, however slight and indirect, could be understood as a direct attack on the status quo of White racial dominance. The system of segregation was implemented to protect White women's racial integrity and, figuratively, that of the entire South from an allegedly imminent lurking threat from Black men seeking to desecrate them (Dailey, 2020, pp. 31–54; Hodes, 1993, pp. 59–74). The participation of White Southern women in campaigns for racial equality fundamentally disrupted these entrenched gendered and racialized norms. Their involvement called into question the idealized image of White women as passive custodians of White racial purity and undermined the cultural norms that had sustained the Jim Crow system for centuries (Dailey, 2020, pp. 2–17). For many White Southerners, the sight of these women engaging in nonviolent protest alongside Black activists represented an existential threat to the cultural and intellectual credibility of the Southern way of life. The activists threatened the so-called Jim Crow system as unlikely dissenters from within, and their behavior was indeed intolerable for most White Southerners (Evans, 1979; Stefani, 2015).

Second, this analysis demonstrates that character assassination, while by definition expected to be public and recognizable to achieve its intended effect, could manifest in

subtler, less frequent forms (Shiraev et al., 2022, pp. 10–11). Even when these attacks against White Southern female civil rights activists' reputations were sporadic or understated, their reliance on the deeply embedded cultural codes of the Jim Crow South ensured their impact and effectiveness. This case study thus sheds light on both the overt and covert mechanisms by which gendered and racialized power structures were maintained and contested during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Given that the media serve as a central pillar in enabling character assassination as a medium through which such attacks are amplified and extended to broader audiences (Shiraev et al., 2022, pp. 96–108), particular emphasis is put on the White Southern press reporting on White Southern female civil rights activism during the 1960s. While some newspapers and magazines relevant to this study, such as *The Augusta Courier* and *Jet Magazine*, are digitized and accessible online, the majority of primary sources were drawn from the personal papers of civil rights activists and organizations. These collections are housed in various archives, including the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, WI, and the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University in Atlanta, GA.

The article first examines the tactics employed by the White Southern press to undermine the reputations of these women, without having to single them out. Subsequently, the analysis situates these campaigns within the cultural context of the Jim Crow South in the 1960s, demonstrating the extent to which prevailing racial and gender norms shaped and intensified these attacks.

WHITE SOUTHERN FEMALE CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND THE WHITE SOUTHERN PRESS

In their influential study *Journalism and Jim Crow*, Sid Bedingfield and Kathy Roberts Forde argue that, in the decades following Reconstruction, the White Southern press actively contributed to the creation, nurture, and perpetuation of the Jim Crow system (2021, pp. 1–2). At the same time, scholarship on character assassination emphasizes that such attacks are inherently public in nature. Fundamentally concerned with perception, they seek to shape how individuals are seen by others and are designed to be heard, seen, or read by an audience. The broader the audience reached, the more effective a character attack is likely to be (Shiraev et al., 2022, pp. 10–11). Within this framework, it seems plausible to assume that the White Southern press of the 1960s, in its effort to safeguard the Jim Crow order against challenges to racial segregation, would have focused its attention on civil rights activists who openly contested the White racial status quo through direct-action campaigns. However, a closer examination of the potential character assassination of Southern White female civil rights activists reveals a striking pattern: the mainstream White Southern press rarely singled these women out individually or employed overtly abusive language in its reporting on their involvement. Instead, the press adopted subtle yet effective rhetorical strategies that maintained an appearance of impartiality while still undermining these women's legitimacy as civil rights activists.

The relative invisibility of White Southern female civil rights activists in the media can be attributed in part to their deliberate efforts to minimize public exposure. They were aware that their mere presence as White women could provoke outrage and, consequently, endanger Black activists as well as the people they were trying to mobilize for racial equality. "Being a white woman meant that wherever I was, the Movement was visible, and where there was visibility there was danger; my presence carried with it the possibility of lynching [...]," reminisced Casey Hayden, a White activist from Texas (2012, pp. 386–387). They especially knew about the jeopardy the White press could pose. Constance Curry, a White Southern activist from Greensboro, North Carolina, shared with civil rights activist and historian, Vincent Harding, that "[y]ou've got to stay in the periphery to keep from getting labeled and involved to the point where you become useless [for the Movement]" (Veterans of Hope Project, 00:22:07–00:27:59). Thus, the majority of Curry's cohort did not participate extensively in direct action protests; in-stead, they worked behind the scenes, at the margins of public visibility with some even taking on formal or titled positions with various civil rights organizations (Höhn, 2024, pp. 161–165; Stefani, 2015, 194–200).

Joan Trumpauer Mulholland was one of the very few White Southern women who participated extensively in nonviolent direct action protests. Throughout the 1960s, she worked closely with influential civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), volunteered on picket lines, participated in various sit-ins that gained national and international recognition, and joined the Freedom Rides in 1961.¹ Hence, she appears in numerous Southern newspaper articles documenting her extensive civil rights activism, including coverage in the *Charlotte Observer* and the *Durham Morning Herald* in North Carolina, as well as the *Clarion-Ledger*, a daily newspaper published in Jackson, Mississippi.

Nevertheless, these news stories generally did not focus solely on Trumpauer Mulholland. The articles rather list her as part of a group of Black and White, male and female, activists protesting segregation. They are written in an objective, impartial language, and most journalists and editors refrained from using overtly derogatory or racist terms in their reporting. Around the turn of the century, readers had begun demanding more facts and less partisan opinion from the ever-growing press. Although the mainstream American media had embraced ideals of independence and impartiality as the dominant paradigm by the 1920s, the press's claim to objectivity also had a political component. Southern journalists and editors developed a new rhetoric that appealed to White Southerners' conservative, segregationist sensibilities while remaining compatible with prevailing professional standards. They determined, after all, their newspaper's coverage. In general, White news stories on civil rights actions tended to offer only brief accounts of events, frequently privileging White perspectives and depicting activists as unruly and culpable for the potential violence associated with the protests (Bedingfield, 2017, pp. 7–9; Kaplan, 2009, pp. 116–139; Schudson, 2009, pp. 140–150).

¹ Freedom Rides were nonviolent direct action protests that primarily took place in 1961. Activists aimed to test whether Southern interstate transit regulations complied with the recent *Boynton v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision. The court order extended the prohibition of the segregation of terminal accommodations, trains, and buses, ultimately challenging the landmark Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* from 1896 that made way for the "separate but equal" doctrine (Arsenault, 2006, pp. 2–3, 33–51); (Meier & Rudwick, 1973, pp. 10, 33–39, 135–137).

Moreover, in White Southern newspapers, People of Color appeared as subjects of reporting for the most part only when they were perceived to have transgressed the prevailing racial order. The mainstream White press's superficial reporting contrasted with the Black press's generally more comprehensive coverage of civil rights protests, which had a long tradition of political activism and confronting White power structures. (Haywood, 2021, pp. 57–80; Roberts & Klibanoff, 2007, pp. 12–23). In February 1961, for example, Joan Trumpauer Mulholland participated in a demonstration in Rock Hill, South Carolina. The conservative White newspaper, the *Washington Star*, reprinted an Associated Press article about the protest action. The article, titled "Jailed Sit-in Students Are Placed in Solitary," concentrates primarily on the alleged misconduct of arrested activists and offers only a brief summary of the events. It continues listing similar protests occurring in the vicinity around the same time. Once again, the account emphasized the number of students arrested and the charges brought against them, while largely neglecting the political aims driving the demonstrations and conspicuously omitting any mention of violence or hostility directed at the protesters. By contrast, the *AFRO-American*, a weekly newspaper with headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, dispatched a reporter to accompany the activists in Rock Hill and document the atmosphere surrounding the demonstration. Frank Hunt's article provides a detailed account of the event, putting special emphasis on the verbal abuse hurled at the protesting Black and White students by angry, and at times openly hostile, bystanders (Joan Trumpauer Mulholland Papers, 1960–1966, 1961a, 1961b).

In a few instances, White news stories could address the women more directly; however, even in these instances, these attacks still pertained to the group of protesters as a whole rather than focusing on a singular White female activist. In May 1963, Trumpauer Mulholland took part in a sit-in at a Woolworth store's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, the most unrepentantly racist state of the old Confederacy. The protest was part of a full-scale direct action campaign that had been in progress since December of the previous year to pressure the city to desegregate. The protest is infamous for the violence the interracial group of activists had to endure for roughly three hours before local police forces stepped in (O'Brien, 2013, pp. 114–144). Photographer Fred Blackwell captured a fraction of the violence of that day in a photo that has become one of the most striking images of the Civil Rights Movement. It depicts three activists sitting at the lunch counter with Trumpauer Mulholland at the center, flanked by Anne Moody, a Black activist and student at Tougaloo College, and John R. Salter, a White faculty member at Tougaloo and one of the protest organizers. They are doused in various condiments, and Salter appears to be bleeding from the back of his head. Their seemingly relaxed conversation contrasts sharply with the crowd of White segregationists whose jeering and harassment underscore the hostility surrounding the demonstration. The *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*, known White segregationist newspapers, featured Blackwell's photos and the accompanying articles attacked the protesters as "outside radical agitators," "real trouble makers," and "active agitators" who infiltrated the city to "occupy" the stools at the lunch counters, create chaos, and disturb the peace (Hunter Gray (John R. Salter) Papers, 1955–2000, 1963a, 1963b, 1963c). In addition to the highly charged language, the articles

stand out for their detailed descriptions of the protest action, thereby underscoring the sit-in's magnitude and exceptionalism.

Similarly, in August 1960, the front-page article of the *Augusta Courier*, a segregationist paper from Georgia, identified organizations based in Atlanta that, according to its title, were planning a "Mass Attack on Segregation." Among the listed groups, the article named the National Student Association's Southern Project. The project was part of the broader National Student Association (NSA) network, a liberal, interracial organization run by students that promoted student academic rights and civil liberties regardless of race, gender, class, religion, or political views. The original idea behind the Southern Project was to bring Southern Black and White students together to promote interracial rapprochement and establish a Southern-wide network of like-minded students and faculty (Whittington, 2013, pp. 83–105). The article identified Constance Curry and her assistant, Donna McGinty, as "the two white girls [in charge]," labeling them as "peculiar Whites" (The *Augusta Courier*, 1960, p. 1, 4).

Although these episodes of name-calling were rare and generally targeted protestors as a whole rather than individual White women, they amounted to a deliberate form of character assassination. When the White press identified White Southern female civil rights activists by name and simultaneously framed them as members of a distinct group marked by pejorative terms such as "peculiar whites" or "outside agitators," the press reinforced their constructed "otherness" from the rest of the White South, thereby discrediting their activism and damaging their reputation (Shiraev et al., 2022, pp. 77–79). Among the majority of White Southerners, the assumption prevailed that every Southerner, Black or White, was content with the Southern way of life and even preferred the system of segregation since it was "best for both races" and offered each race the right to "an equal chance." This amicable and peaceful coexistence of Black and White Southerners warranted the "good race relations" the South supposedly enjoyed (Johnson, 1943, pp. 210–213; Lavelle, 2015, pp. 56–58; Sokol, 2007, pp. 12–15, 56–61, 69–70). Hence, White defenders of Jim Crow made external forces responsible for the rising civil rights protests since no "true" Southerner would be this dissatisfied with the region's social order to see the need to disturb the peace. They rationalized these "outside agitators" as Northern Black or White "radicals" who supposedly infiltrated local communities with ill intent to incite the otherwise content Black population to create civil unrest (Hunter Gray (John R. Salter) Papers, 1955–2000, 1963c; Matthews & Prothro, 1966, pp. 436–438). This point is underscored by the fact that the press's decision to label civil rights activists as "outside agitators" was intentional; it was fully capable of identifying these women by name and, thus, aware of their background and local origins.

Still, at first glance and based on the rhetoric used by the Southern White press, the character assassination of White Southern female civil rights activists appears mild and, more importantly, not immediately connected to their gender.

SOUTHERN CULTURE AND THE CHARACTER ASSASSINATION OF WHITE SOUTHERN FEMALE CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

A closer examination of the specific cultural context in which these character assassinations occurred reveals both the scope these attacks could have and the particular role gender played within them. Southerners lived in a distinct social system and political economy within which notions of gender, class, and race became entangled in mutually reinforcing and deeply pathological ways. At the heart of Southern myth-making stood the idealized figure of the White woman. She was portrayed as the sacred guardian of White civilization, her supposed racial purity portrayed as irreproachable and in constant need of protection from demonized Black men. In the name of defending this glorified notion of sacred White womanhood, White Southerners enacted Jim Crow laws and institutionalized lynching. As a result, the sociopolitical and sociocultural idealization of White womanhood served as a consistent source of stability for White supremacy, encoding the values of traditional Southern culture that every White Southerner had internalized from an early age (Dailey, 2020, pp. 3–6; Johnson, 1943, pp. 219–220; Stefani, 2011, p. 4).

This mythologizing of Southern White womanhood extended far beyond individual identity, shaping collective ideals and expectations that carried immense social weight. Whether a woman assumed or was assigned the role of the glorified Southern lady, she became an embodiment of the South's class, race, and gender system as well as its imagined past and future (Appiah, 2018, pp.8–20; Jones, 2009, pp. 42–43; Ware, 1992, p. 12). Southerners shared an emotional connection to the values embedded in their society's culture, including the prevailing racial codes that governed the interactions between Black and White Southerners to sustain White racial dominance. These etiquettes of race relations encoded the customs that defined and maintained the social distance between people and allotted them distinct positions within the Jim Crow racial hierarchy (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 191; Griffin, 2006, pp. 6–28; Ritterhouse, 2010, pp. 2–6).

Within this intricate web of social codes, any deviation was fraught with risk, particularly for those who challenged the established racial order. As Shiraev, Keohane, Icks, and Samoilenko have comprehensively emphasized, the effectiveness of character assassinations depends fundamentally on "the audience." Each attack is directed toward a particular audience and its shared belief system; reputational damage occurs when the audience accepts the negative framing of the target. The interplay of dominant explicit and implicit cultural norms shared by a given community thus defines what constitutes an individual's "good character," delineating the boundaries of acceptable conduct and speech beyond which one's reputation may be compromised (2022, pp. 14, 150–151, 156–157). Therefore, to estimate the impact of character assassination campaigns targeting Southern White female civil rights activists, it is essential to examine how effectively these attacks resonated with White defenders of Jim Crow.

The media coverage of civil rights activities helped cultivate the hostile atmosphere that fueled White Southerners' massive resistance. During the 1950s and 1960s, reporting

on demonstrations, arrests, and court cases represented a significant channel through which the public became aware of individuals' participation in the Movement. For instance, Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, whose mother adhered firmly to the prevailing Southern racial order, intentionally called her mother to disclose her activism before it appeared in the press, anticipating that newspapers would identify her by name and make her parents aware of her actions (1961, p. 20).

As the White Southern press of the 1960s remained largely segregated, many journalists and editors actively worked to safeguard the racist system through specific narratives and images designed to undermine the growing civil rights actions. Although some segments of the White press had gradually adopted more liberal positions on questions of integration and, in some cases, openly supported the Civil Rights Movement, as exemplified by the *Atlanta Constitution* under editor Ralph McGill, a substantial number of White newspapers remained conservative or explicitly segregationist, particularly in states of the Deep South such as Mississippi and South Carolina (Bedingfield, 2017, pp. 4–7; Bedingfield & Forde, 2021, pp. 1–14, 307–308; Thomas, William G., III., 2004). An article in *Times Magazine* called out Jackson's *Clarion Ledger* and the *Daily News* editor, James Myron Ward, for publishing "unabashed prejudice" news stories on civil rights issues, declaring his papers' "aggressive guard[ing]" of the Jim Crow system responsible for "why Mississippi remain[ed] the South's most stubborn center of segregation" ("The Press," 1961).

Rather than using overtly derogatory language and relying solely on name-calling to discredit civil rights activists, the White press more commonly released the personal information of each protester arrested or identified. Apart from a person's full name, this data included their age, gender, race, where they were from, and, according to White Southern activist Joan Browning, in some cases, even their complete addresses, in case anyone wanted to discuss their civil rights activism with them (n.d., pp. 5, 7, 14). As previously mentioned, journalists and editors did not act as passive observers; they made deliberate decisions about which stories to cover and how to contextualize them, decisions that were inherently political (Bedingfield & Forde, 2021, p. 5). By publishing the personal information of civil rights activists, they not only enabled outraged segregationists to seek retribution but also signaled their willingness to tolerate – if not actively encourage – such, possibly violent, responses.

For instance, Nancy Stoller received a threatening call after her participation in an integrated direct action protest in 1960 became public. The morning after the police dispersed the protest, the sheriff's office announced the names and addresses of each activist involved to the local paper. Since Stoller was still registered as living with her parents, the paper published their address. That night, an anonymous person threatened retribution against Stoller and her family. "Where is your daughter?" the caller asked her parents, who had picked up the phone. "Out with the n[...]? We'll take care of her and you too" (2019, p. 73). White Southerners' harassment did not stop at threatening phone calls but also resorted to sending hate mail, or "fan mail," as Joan Trumpauer Mulholland sarcastically called the numerous letters and postcards arriving at her address after her

enrollment as one of the first full-time White student at the historical Black Tougaloo College in 1961 made national news (Mulholland, 2011, 00:39:50-00:39:54). One such letter declared her "a very poor excuse for [a] white wom[a]n" ("Miss. Sheriff Probes White," 1961, p. 20).

Other letters expressed their sentiments in more unambiguous language. "Race mixing is a dumb, stupid, unnatural action," Trumpauer Mulholland recites one particular letter in the 2011 documentary about her civil rights activism. "[It] will result in [the] mongrelization of white Christian America and civilization. Race mixing is a subversive device of the communist plot to destroy America and White Christianity. If you preach, teach, or advocate race mixing, you are promoting the communist line and the religion of the devil" (Mulholland, 2011, 00:39:10-00:39:49). In light of the Cold War, it was a common assumption that civil rights activism was linked with a communist conviction. Since communists supposedly rejected organized religion, to "embrace" communism via opposition to segregation was to reject the core Christian values underpinning the Southern way of life (Woods, 2003, pp. 12–48, 85–111). These examples demonstrate that the White public viewed the women's actions through the lens of interracial sex, threatening to subvert the racial status quo. The letters combine the assumptions, stereotypes, and apprehensions White Southerners had regarding racial integration, and people like Trumpauer Mulholland and Stoller fighting to overcome the Jim Crow system.

White journalists and editors effectively used the norms and cultural setting of the segregated South to influence their audience's evaluation of White Southern female civil rights activists, demonstrating to them that the women had, indeed, deviated from the acceptable conduct expected from White women. Their defamation functioned in at least two interrelated ways. Firstly, the character attacks were carried out through fearmongering. Articles such as those published by the *Jackson Daily News* (1963b) and the *Clarion Ledger* (1963c) in their coverage of the 1963 Jackson Woolworth sit-in drew on this deeply embedded racial mythology. By identifying Joan Trumpauer Mulholland as a member of an interracial group of activists, these reports deliberately evoked anxiety and alarm among White Southerners. Without resorting to explicit accusations or inflammatory language, such coverage cast Trumpauer Mulholland as a destabilizing figure whose actions symbolized a fundamental threat to Southern racial order. The mere suggestion of interracial proximity – sitting beside People of Color, conversing with them, sharing food, or even the implied possibility of physical contact – was sufficient to activate long-standing fears within the White Southern imagination. White female activists had rejected the idealized image of the passive White woman, the "damsel in distress" whose racial purity required constant vigilance and protection. In the logic of segregationist ideology, such behavior struck at the core of White supremacist anxieties surrounding interracial intimacy, marriage, and the erosion of the status quo of White superiority (Shirayev et al., 2022, p. 82). These implications did not need to be spelled out; given that People of Color rarely appeared as subjects in White Southern newspapers except when portrayed as violating the racial status quo, readers were primed to interpret interracial activism as inherently dangerous. This context amplified the fear-inducing potential of such news reports, enabling them to function more powerfully than overt condemnation.

Secondly, these character attacks operated through the form of disgracing, designed to strip White female civil rights activists of the social honor and respectability associated with the ideal of sacred White womanhood in the South. The effectiveness of this strategy is particularly evident in the accusation that branded Joan Trumpauer Mulholland as a "poor excuse of [a] White wom[a]n" ("Miss. Sheriff Probes White," 1961, p. 20). Such statements drew on a deeply entrenched value construct that defined Southern White womanhood through a specific combination of moral principles and socially sanctioned forms of behavior, including sexual purity, passivity, and adherence to norms of female decorum (Jones, 2009, pp. 42–44; Stefani, 2015, pp. 14–39). Within this ideological context, the framing of news reports encouraged readers to interpret the women's actions as sexual and moral depravity. Women like Trumpauer Mulholland and Stoller had broken with the glorified notion of White womanhood. They attacked the South's cultural conventions and social order by not behaving according to the generally accepted societal norms of female decorum. Figuratively, their actions were perceived as a fall from the pedestal of womanly honor and racial purity. These transgressions placed the women beyond the pale and rendered them undeserving of the respect traditionally accorded to White women. Consequently, the activists were stripped of some of the privileges associated with the idealized notion of White womanhood. Their demeanor absolved White Southerners of any normative obligation to protect and honor White women, rendering the women vulnerable to public condemnation and shame (Fox, 1977, pp. 805–809, 817; Fosl, 2004, pp. 104–105, 111–113, 121–123; Höhn, 2024, pp. 293–295). As a result, press portrayals of women like Trumpauer Mulholland and Stoller resonated with what White audiences believed they already knew, reinforcing existing prejudices of these women as "race traitors" while lending journalistic legitimacy to attacks on the women's character and reputation.

The discriminatory phrase "race traitor" was used to insult, humiliate, shame, and dishonor a person. It expressed, on the one hand, the fundamental betrayal the accused has done to the racial group they identify with or were identified with and, on the other hand, their subsequent ostracization from that community. In the context of the Jim Crow system, the term was used to describe a person whose actions threatened the existing social order (Wray, 2006, pp. 1–3). As far as can be ascertained, it was not used in the reporting on White Southern female civil rights activists. Enraged defenders of the Jim Crow system more commonly hurled this and similar racist and derogatory terms at White activists during demonstrations. (Moody, 1968, p. 236; Johnson, 1943, pp. 213–214). Although the term itself rarely appeared in print, the tone, language, and framing of newspaper coverage subtly conveyed these accusations, allowing readers to interpret the underlying message and reinforcing the social stigma attached to such perceived betrayals.

These character assassinations were further reinforced by the involvement of certain state agencies that were explicitly tasked with preserving segregation and generally authorized to use extensive measures. These measures could include sharing sensitive information with other state agencies across state lines, with local police forces, and with the press. Journalists and editors wielded considerable power when they formed alliances with political, industrial, and financial elites or when they themselves operated as such leaders. Through these connections, members of the press did not merely shape public

discourse; they also assumed active roles in the construction and enforcement of state and municipal political, economic, and social policies designed to sustain the Jim Crow system and the legislative frameworks that supported it (Bedingfield & Forde, 2021, pp. 5, 12). In 2020, Jimmie E. Gates from the *Clarion Ledger* disclosed that, in the 1950s and 1960s, editors of the newspaper, as well as those of the *Jackson Daily News*, had ties to the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC). Created by the Mississippi legislature in March 1956, the MSSC was explicitly intended to preserve racial segregation and shield the state from federally mandated integration. According to Gates, the newspapers routinely suppressed news stories and disseminated racist propaganda at the MSSC's request, demonstrating the extent to which editorial decisions could be intertwined with state power (2020; Davies & Smith, 2001, pp. 88–89). Similar hard power was exercised by the owner and editor of the *Augusta Courier*, the paper that attacked civil rights activist Constance Curry as a "peculiar White" (The *Augusta Courier*, 1960, 4). Roy V. Harris was a White supremacist politician and prominent member of the White Citizens' Councils of Georgia. During the 1960s, Harris served on the Board of Regents, the governing body of public higher education, where he actively opposed the desegregation of colleges and universities, emphasizing the deliberate nature of the character attacks directed at Southern White female civil rights activists and reenforcing the argument that the press's ostensibly objective language was anything but impartial (Browning, personal communication, October 4, 2018; McMillen, 1994, pp. 87–90).

White Southern women undermined the Southern founding myths with their participation in nonviolent direct action campaigns of the 1960s. Their activism confronted the White South with the unsettling reality that, of all people, the glorified custodians of its racial purity supported Black demands for equal rights and rejected racial segregation. Thus, Southern White female activists were perceived as threats to the cultural and intellectual legitimacy of segregation. In response, the White Southern press attacked the women's reputations. While these attacks were infrequent, journalists and editors amplified their impact by subtly embedding ideologically charged remarks into their reporting, thereby normalizing stigmatization through seemingly incidental yet highly consequential commentary.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined whether White female civil rights activists were targets of character assassinations. While the analysis confirms that this was the case, it also shows that such campaigns operated in subtler, more indirect ways than might initially be assumed. Throughout the 1960s, press coverage of this cohort of activists remained comparatively limited, and character attacks were rarely conducted on a large scale or through overt denunciation. This was due in part to the women's own efforts to avoid public attention, but also to the White Southern press's reluctance to draw explicit focus to White Southern opposition to segregation, an acknowledgment that would have disrupted the carefully cultivated image of a unified White South committed to the Jim Crow system. There was a mounting concern that women such as Constance Curry, Nancy

Stoller, and Joan Trumpauer Mulholland might serve as exemplars for other potential White Southern dissenters.

Nevertheless, under the protective guise of journalistic objectivity, White Southern newspapers embedded the region's social and cultural codes within ostensibly neutral language when reporting on the Civil Rights Movement. In doing so, they drew on familiar racialized and gendered tropes without foregrounding White Southern participation in the Movement itself. This strategy rendered the character assassination of Southern White female civil rights activists effective and undermined their reputations while maintaining the appearance of professional impartiality. Beyond its focus on this specific group, the case study offers broader insight into the mechanisms through which the White Southern press and public responded to social upheaval in the 1960s. Further research is needed to determine whether similar strategies were employed in press portrayals of White male activists or Black women, and to what extent comparable cultural tropes were mobilized to discredit their reputations. Mary King reflected that although she knew that the White South would defend its way of life, "it came as a shock to my self-image suddenly to see myself through the eyes of our opponents: Law-breakers, 'n[...] lover,' deviant, and radicals" (1987, p. 115).

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O „VANJSKIM AGITATORICAMA”, „NEOBIČNIM BJELKINJAMA” I „JADNIM ISPRIKAMA ZA BJELKINJE”: UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE BJELKINJA AKTIVISTICA U POKRETU ZA GRAĐANSKA PRAVA 60-IH GODINA 20. STOLJEĆA NA AMERIČKOM JUGU

Clara-Sophie Höhn

SAŽETAK Ovaj rad polazi od teze da su bjelkinje uključene u Pokret za građanska prava 60-ih godina 20. stoljeća bile izložene sustavnom uništavanju reputacije te da je učinkovitost tih napada uvelike proizlazila iz mobilizacije rodno i raso uvjetovanih kulturnih normi koje su oblikovale društveno-politički život američkog juga tijekom razdoblja rasne segregacije do koje je došlo primjenom tzv. zakona Jima Crowa. Usredotočujući se na skupinu bjelkinja s američkog juga rođenih tijekom 30-ih i ranih 40-ih godina 20. stoljeća, rad analizira kako su one prikazane u bjelačkome južnjačkom tisku. Rezultati pokazuju da su napadi djelovali prvenstveno suptilno i neizravno, a ne putem otvorene osude. Ugrađujući regionalne društvene i kulturne obrasce u naizgled objektivno novinsko izvještavanje, bjelački južnjački tisak mobilizirao je raso i rodno obilježene trope kojima su aktivistice diskreditirane, dok je istodobno umanjivana uloga bijelih južnjaka u Pokretu za građanska prava. Takva je strategija omogućila tisku da potkopa legitimitet aktivistica, istodobno zadržavajući privid novinarske objektivnosti.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE, ROD, POKRET ZA GRAĐANSKA PRAVA, TISAK, AKTIVIZAM

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