The national African-American Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation movement have been analyzed as interdependent on several levels. As Sara Evans has argued, the Civil Rights Movement, particularly its inventive forms of direct action, “provided” women’s rights’ activism with “a new model for social change and language about equality, rights, and community.” Activism in both movements overlapped, and one of the achievements for social equality and women’s rights was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” became one of the rallying points of the Women’s Liberation Movement, and her description of “the problem that has no name” gave a name and a narrative to gender expectations, ideas of “motherhood,” and the separation of the public and private sphere, seemingly mandated by 1950s domestic containment policies. This depiction has been increasingly differentiated, however, as historians have pointed out that postwar popular culture was not as uniform as portrayed and “also expressed ambivalence about domesticity,” and that Friedan’s and other liberal feminists’ assessment was both race- and class-specific.

Moreover, questions were raised as to whether the framing of women’s rights’ activism in the popular “waves”-model is entirely adequate, if meaningful continuities to prior years can be established, and if and how the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was based on earlier women’s social activism. Indeed, a number of liberal white women, for example, as members of the Urban League, the NAACP or the National Council of Jewish Women, had already intertwined questions of race and gender equality in their social activism and fight against
segregation in the 1950s and earlier. Taking a step further: how could conservative, white women’s activism during the mid- and late 1950s, the decade in which traditional gender roles were particularly pronounced and increasingly contested, and Massive Resistance was launched against the Civil Rights Movement, be positioned towards the Women’s Liberation Movement? Was there a link between conservative women’s public activism and the growing challenge to gender roles and the separation of the spheres?

In this paper, I will analyze segregationist women’s grassroots groups from South Carolina, Arkansas and Louisiana that were active in Massive Resistance during the late 1950s and early 1960s in terms of their emancipatory or “proto-feminist” potential, as Phoebe Godfrey has termed it. Given women’s various forms of activism and, in certain cases, the fact that it lasted for years, it cannot be discussed in its entirety. I will, therefore, focus on key events and statements by segregationist women activists. I understand these women as self-conscious agents, and suggest that despite the fact that they never explicitly and fundamentally challenged the ideological concepts of womanhood, manhood or maternal ideals, they - at times implicitly, at times explicitly – claimed certain political positions on gender that were mirrored in the Women’s Liberation Movement: stressing the importance of women for the citizenry, making women heard in public life and in the political arena, and claiming that certain female activism had a particular, indispensible quality.

First, I will give a brief introduction to the emergence of Massive Resistance and gender aspects, second, analyze segregationist women’s actions, and finally, problematize the ambivalence of women’s activism in this inherently conservative movement, and the potential for emancipatory subversion while defending a status quo.
When the Supreme Court of the United States of America, in the case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, declared racial segregation as unconstitutional in public education, segregationists across the South formed a resistance movement which came to be known as “Massive Resistance.” White politicians as well as grass-roots activists attacked the ruling from a variety of hostile positions, including the defense of states’ rights, the Biblical basis for racial subordination, and denouncing integrationists as Communist agents. Since the First Reconstruction, the ideological construct of White Southern Womanhood has been a battleground for proponents and opponents of desegregation. Traditionally, women were defined as gatekeepers of segregationists’ idea of “racial purity” against “miscegenation,” and served as a collective symbol for the white “South.” Yet, white women were not only white supremacy’s mute icons, but vocal segregationists themselves who injected their idea of “the integrity of the races” into Massive Resistance’s predominantly masculinist discourse.

Segregationist women’s activism took on varied forms, which were gender-, class-, age-, and region-related. South Carolina evaded highly publicized school desegregation crises in contrast to Arkansas, Louisiana or Mississippi but built up legal and political road block after road block, until Clemson University was the first public educational facility to enroll Harvey Gantt in 1963. Here, segregationist women’s activism seems to have had substantial ties with traditional conservative, middle- to upper-class women’s groups and was most prominently pursued by elderly women. A Mrs. E. Lipscomb, who became vice-president of the segregationist Charleston Grass Roots League in 1959, had already been the regent of the South Carolina DAR, the state president of the Colonial Dames of the 17th Century, the department president of the American Legion Auxiliary, and a member the United Daughters of the Confederacy.
Beth Roy has argued that “school desegregation was a struggle that especially evoked women’s activism,” because “who else could better claim the moral authority to speak up when the site of contestation was the domain of children?” As she goes on to say, entering “into public discourse,” however, “was itself an act of defiance,” as it challenged the status quo of the separation of the spheres. Moreover, women segregationists did not limit themselves to educational policies, but sought to defend segregation with a variety of arguments, thus subtly subverting the confinements of their public presence. As shown by Jessie Allison Butler, women segregationists were even critical at times of the alleged timidity of fellow male activists. Citizens’ Council member Butler proclaimed: “In my opinion, most of our men should have lace sewed on their trousers. They are afraid of their own shadows – and most women! No comment.”

Taking matters into her own hands, Sara Ervin founded the “Women’s States Rights Association;” describing her organization as ‘a fraternal and patriotic association, pledging to promote constitutional government, states’ rights, individual liberties and freedom of choice [and] also pledging to combat socialism and communism.” Self-consciously using “some innocent sounding name” to make people “more readily organize”, Ervin was most concerned with matching the publicity campaigns of the NAACP and “weeding out” teachers who favored integration.

Abandoning her former belief that a woman’s name should show up in the newspaper only twice in her life – “when she was born and when she died” – and leaving “lady-like gentility” behind, as her daughter and supporters noted, Grass Roots League member Cornelia Tucker asked church organizations to purge their shelves of “un-American” literature, initiated letter-writing campaigns against desegregation and “federal encroachment,” and would later become “pivotal”
in the establishment of the Republican Party in Charleston and a member of the John Birch Society.\textsuperscript{x} Although female South Carolinian segregationists predominantly only “extended” their previous conservative, traditionally gendered club activism, some of them became a permanent presence in public political discourses and sought to generally expand their public influence.

In contrast, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the mostly middle-aged, working-class women and self-described “working mothers” who formed the segregationist “Mothers’ League of Central High School”, only two weeks before the Little Rock Nine were to start attending Central in September 1957, had not been organized in any way prior to Massive Resistance. Central High’s vice principal, Elizabeth Huckaby, even described the women and their children as “unknowns” in “school life” and “in the community.”\textsuperscript{xii} The Mothers’ League had close ties to Little Rock’s Capital Citizens’ Council, and, in the beginning, even relied on their funding – a fact that has led a number of historians to inadequately dismiss the woman’s group as mere “puppets.”\textsuperscript{xiii}

The group, who by October 1957 counted 168 members, started off with a vote of confidence in women’s special abilities, however, when its president, Nadine Aaron, proclaimed that the looming integration crisis was “a matter for the mothers to settle, and it is time for the mothers to take over;”\textsuperscript{xiv} thus implying that the mothers were to infuse Little Rock’s previously small-numbered resistance movement with a particular quality and effectiveness it had been lacking so far, and insinuating the mothers’ particular determination and ability “to settle this matter” as if it were a private dispute.

The League’s name choice, and its self-conception as a “Christian and non-violent” organization, in turn, made good use of “the unassailable twin mantles of Christianity and the sacred authority of southern mothers,”\textsuperscript{xv} as Graeme Cope aptly noted. Indeed, as Ruth Feldstein has argued,
despite the fact that the glorification of domesticity, that Friedan described, had class restrictions, the ideology of white womanhood and motherhood symbolically “accommodated all white women across lines of class,” and thus bestowed the socially unknown working-class women of the Mothers’ League with a sense of respectability and legitimacy for their activism. Moreover, Phoebe Godfrey contends that for white working-class women in particular, the defense of segregation earned them the right “to transgress their gender and social class position through their ‘whiteness.’”

The Mothers’ League employed gendered means of protest by staging tearful meetings with Governor Orval Faubus, where sobbing girls hugged him in front of the press cameras, or by playing up racialized and gendered fears of white girls dating African American boys. Although the League confined itself to stereotypical displays of female activism in these situations, the Mothers’ League continued to expand the meaning of activism in the name of motherhood. In terms of violence, the League played the role of a double agent: officially opposing violence, Mothers’ League members were among the mob that escalated the Little Rock crisis; their recording secretary, Mary Thomason, even tried to break through police lines, appealing to fellow male activists to “get these N-word” and taunting them with “Where’s your manhood?!” The League’s argumentative stance broadened regarding their defense of segregation, and it initiated several law suits against the School Board and US army General Edwin Walker. In November 1957, the League’s new president and divorced, working mother of two, Margaret Jackson, and Mary Thomason even ran for Little Rock’s city manager board, being only narrowly defeated.

Again, the seemingly narrow and traditionally framed activism of segregationist women in Massive Resistance seems to have been able to push certain boundaries: The League seems to
have gained legitimacy for their activism by officially adhering to conservative gender roles and calling upon men, yet, taking decisive, even physical action themselves. The group’s activism provided a means for working-class mothers to participate in the city’s public discourse and even the election arena; an achievement Godfrey thus called “proto-feminist.”

Finally, the most unusual female segregationists in Massive Resistance might have been the loosely organized group of 40 to 60 young to middle-aged women who New Orleans’ police and press called “The Cheerleaders.” These working-class women protested the desegregation of New Orleans’ William Frantz Public School by six-year-old Ruby Bridges in November 1960, after Federal District Court Judge Skelley Wright had to enjoin no less than 775 Louisiana state and local officials from interfering.\textsuperscript{xx} As Betty Friedan wrote, one could “sometimes get away” in public with not really being or acting like a housewife if one made oneself “sound like a housewife,” but these self-professed housewives and mothers rejected a politely “politicized domesticity,” and soon acquired a reputation for their particular vulgarity and aggressiveness.\textsuperscript{xxi}

The Cheerleaders did not rely on chivalrous white men to defend white supremacy, but threatened and spat at Ruby, screamed insults and rained eggs and rocks on the few white parents whose children still attended William Frantz’ and African-American passersby. As the \textit{Times-Picayune} reported, “tempers burned” as white parents “slipped six white children into the school” one day, and “screaming, cursing women [...] manhandled a university student, a New Orleans attorney, a cameraman and a local newspaper reporter” who happened to be identified as “integrationists.”\textsuperscript{xxii} The Cheerleaders were particularly vile towards Rev. Andrew Foreman, who ignored segregationists’ call for a school boycott: they threatened to strangle him, and threw rocks at his black-and-white, thus “integrated,” dog.\textsuperscript{xxiii}
Although, as John Steinbeck noted on his *Travels With Charlie*, the Cheerleaders seemed to have staged “a well-rehearsed show, […] no spontaneous cry of anger,” and despite the gatherings’ quality of “a frightening witches’ Sabbath,” according to Steinbeck, rigid segregationist convictions and a media strategy underpinned the women’s obvious attention-seeking. One of the ring-leaders, the 42-year-old New Orleans’ native Antoinette Andrews, for example, told a reporter that she had been a Citizens’ Council member for five years. During the following weeks, the Cheerleaders showed up daily despite the cold, and when a newspaper reporter advised one of the mothers who were complaining about their “freezing” feet that she could just “go home,” she answered: “You don’t think we have to stay? […] We’re working, too; we can’t leave.” Expressing their determination, another Cheerleader added: “I’ve been here from the start, and I’m staying to the finish.”

Clearly, the Cheerleaders were everything but silent, gentle mothers or Southern Belles, but a loud and vulgar, yet female public spearhead of Massive Resistance; a fact that led mostly male commentators to demonize them. *Good Housekeeping* portrayed the Cheerleaders less than lady-like as “[w]omen in bright, tight […] pants, their hair done up in curlers.” Steinbeck even questioned their femininity altogether, asserting that the Cheerleaders “were not mothers, not even women.” The Cheerleaders, however, in contrast to the Mothers’ League, were not after middle-class female respectability, but doing a job, as they said. They seemed remarkably undisturbed, at times even proud of the negative public attention, and seem to have provided each other with practical and emotional support – a political strategy and public impact that might merit the term “proto-feminist.”

In conclusion: all of the segregationist women activists derived their initial activism’s legitimacy from traditional female roles, be it the conservative club woman, the mother concerned for her
child, or the politicized housewife, looking out for her family. To be clear: none of these women's groups fundamentally questioned gender roles and the underlying concepts of manhood, (Southern) womanhood or motherhood – many even criticized a perceived crisis in masculinity and chivalry that Massive Resistance was supposed to counter. Yet, ironically, many of the women seemed to have taken steps to fill this perceived void themselves, and confidently claimed both legitimacy and capability due to their gender and gendered roles to take on the task.

Moreover, the women’s groups did not strictly adhere to traditionally defined women’s roles, but seem to have subtly and gradually subverted them; respectively did not adhere to them in the first place, as the Cheerleaders who rejected “ladylike” respectability. Women thus pushed boundaries, diversified Massive Resistance’s discourse, and broke into the public sphere – perhaps precisely because of their conservatism. By fighting to uphold the social status quo, segregationist women activists seem to have been less threatening to hegemonic gender conversations; paradoxically, however, by their activism, segregationist women – mostly self-consciously and gradually – increased women’s presence, voice and impact in the public sphere.


7 Newspaper clipping, dated “1957”, Stanley F. Morse Papers, Box 5, Folder 406; Newspaper clipping, dated 1959, *Stanley F. Morse Papers*, Box 5, Folder 408, South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.


9 *Southern School News*, “South Carolina,” February 1956, 16.

10 Sara S. Ervin to Stanley Morse, 8 August 1955, *Morse Papers*, Box 8, Folder 588.


13 “Mothers’ League Has Open Meeting; Closed To Press”, *Arkansas Gazette* August 24, 1957, 7A.


16 Cf. Jacoway, Elizabeth: *Tarn Away Thy Son. Little Rock, the Crisis that Shocked the Nation* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 170.

17 *SSN*, December 1960, front page.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.