

Women Have Always Been a Part of White Supremacy

JENN M. JACKSON AUGUST 18, 2017

In this op-ed, Jenn M. Jackson — the [Water Cooler Convos](#) editor-in-chief and [That Black Couple](#) podcast cohost, who is a Ph.D. candidate studying black politics, social movements, gender, and sexuality at the University of Chicago — explores the role of women in white supremacy and our collective memory that continues to cloud the issue.

When you look back at the images from the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, last weekend, you might get the impression that women were largely absent. But that doesn't mean they haven't always been present in white supremacist ideas and actions in very important, albeit less memorable, ways.

Let's get a little background first. Last Friday, hundreds of white nationalists descended on the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest plans for the [removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee](#). Over the course of two days, the ensuing violence plastered on social media depicted the beating of 20-year-old [Deandre Harris](#) with metal bars and the death of 32-year-old Heather Heyer after a driver plowed into a crowd of counterprotesters, injuring at least 19 others in the process.

Like many violent racial events in this country's past, history will record Charlottesville as a mixture of toxic masculinity and anti-black and anti-

Semitic rage. This is the sort of rage that paints white supremacy, and all of its trappings, as the domain of (white) men. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

For the most part, women are not mentioned in history unless they are martyrs, heroines, princesses, or feminists. When they are upholding a system as violent and exploitative as white supremacy, they are pretty much ignored altogether. But they show up on occasion, and technology has helped with that.

Many people's first exposure to this came from the iconic images of the Civil Rights Era. Maybe it was the [photo of then-15-year-old Hazel Bryan](#) gnarling up her face, pacing with an angry white mob behind a sunglasses-clad Elizabeth Eckford in Little Rock in 1957. Eckford was attempting to desegregate Little Rock Central High School. The goal of the photo was to show the horrors of white supremacy, yet it inadvertently highlighted the investment white women had in keeping that system in place.

But women and white supremacy were bosom buddies long before we had the technology to capture them on film.

During the period of legal enslavement of continental Africans and their African-American descendants in the United States, the slave household was the primary domain of white women who were married to white slave masters. They were called "slave mistresses." Slave mistresses set out to "civilize" enslaved black women whom they forced to nurse their children, cook the family's food, and act as handmaids for the white children who technically owned them. According to Duke University historian Thavolia

Glymph's book *Out of the House of Bondage*, “mistresses beat and humiliated slaves” in an effort to silence discontent and quell resistance. Meanwhile, these enslaved women's proximity to slave masters made them even more susceptible to rape and other physical abuse. These aren't the popular images and myths about slavery, though.

What is critical here is that white women were working in the plantation household to *normalize* white supremacy. Thus, even when the peculiar institution of slavery was eradicated, the culture and logic underlying it prevailed.

The Ku Klux Klan was [founded in December 1865](#) — just days after the [States ratified the 13th amendment](#) abolishing slavery and during the [period of Reconstruction](#), which lasted from 1865 to 1877 and during which some Southern political leaders made an attempt to “build an interracial democracy on the ashes of slavery,” as Columbia University history professor Eric Foner wrote in *The New York Times*. [Black Americans during this period](#) saw increased access to voting and political representation, property rights, and education. Southern whites, many of whom were destitute and economically unstable after the vast material and human losses of the Civil War, felt [threatened](#) by the newfound freedom and success of previously enslaved black Americans. In response to the potential loss of their “heritage,” new organizations emerged at the end of the 19th century.

One of the most prominent groups to participate in the preservation and purification of the failed white supremacist regime was the [United Daughters of the Confederacy](#), founded in 1894. The Daughters [worked alongside organizations](#) like the Klan to grow white supremacist frameworks

in the South. They were integral in erecting [statues and monuments](#) to commemorate the Confederate generals and soldiers who were their own family members. While they claim these efforts were about history, they instead [sanitized our memory](#) of those states that had seceded from the Union, and downplayed the Confederate states' enduring commitments to those ideologies even after the war ended.

During that time, the perception that black Americans would dispossess white Southerners was met with swift racial violence in the form of lynchings.

There are many accounts of the horrors of the [more than 4,000 recorded lynchings](#) in the United States. These events between 1877 and 1950 are often described using the [term "strange fruit"](#) (popularized especially by the Billie Holiday song) because beaten and burned black Americans' bodies would be swinging from trees. The earliest and arguably most thorough account of white women's role in the lynchings of black American men came from anti-lynching activist and journalist Ida B. Wells in *A Red Record*.

Wells found that black men accused of raping white women were often lynched without ever going to trial which "had the effect of fastening the odium" upon them. The clearest example of this "odium" is the brutal 1955 kidnapping and killing of [14-year-old Emmett Till](#) for supposedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant Donham — [a fact that she now admits was a lie](#). Perhaps these events shed light on the strange invisibility of white women among the white nationalists rallying in Charlottesville and some of their political behavior today.

Immediately following the election of Donald Trump, commentators and pundits alike were stunned, asking, “Who are these 53% of white women who voted for Trump?” Shocked that these women would support a man who had been recorded saying it was totally permissible to “grab ‘em by the p*ssy,” some believed — at least in this case — gender solidarity should outweigh racial ties.

But why are we still (seriously) asking that question now? Is it because we simply cannot fathom that many white women have a vested interest in white supremacy because it benefits them, too? Can we not envision a world where white women benefit from white privilege and power — whether they intend to or not? Are we so committed to our own logic and beliefs that we cannot believe the *actual* historical facts of the matter?

Current events may be relatively silent on the role of women in white supremacy, but history is quite loud. White women are number two in a deeply entrenched racial order in the United States. And when we talk about whiteness being threatened or violent public protests to preserve that order, we are always talking about women, too.

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