

# Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan

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Many contemporary oral histories are rooted in principles of progressive and feminist politics, particularly in a respect for the truth of each informant's life experiences and a quest to preserve the memory of ordinary people's lives. Feminist scholars have been in the forefront of efforts to elaborate these ideals as methodological principles, seeking ways to dissolve the traditional distinction between historian-as-authority and informant-as-subject and to create what the sociologist Judith Stacey calls "an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her 'subjects.'"<sup>1</sup>

Such oral history practices have been designed primarily to study and record the lives of "people who, historically speaking, would otherwise remain inarticulate."<sup>2</sup> From this tradition of history from the bottom up has come a rich and sensitive body of interviews with union organizers, feminist activists, civil rights workers, and others whose experience progressive and feminist scholars share and whose life stories and world views they often find laudable.

Historians have paid less attention to the life stories of ordinary people whose political agendas they find unsavory, dangerous, or deliberately deceptive.<sup>3</sup> Oral history is a particularly valuable source for rectifying this scholarly lacuna since right-wing, reactionary, and racial hate groups tend to be secretive and highly transient, limiting the availability and usefulness of traditional documentary sources. But

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Parai (New York, 1991), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York, 1979), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions to historians' inattention to people whose politics they abhor include interviews with Spanish Falange militants and fascists and with Boston antibusing activists. See Sheelagh M. Elwood, "Not So Much a Programme, More a Way of Life: Oral History and Spanish Fascism," *Oral History Journal*, 16 (Autumn 1988), 57-66; Fraser, *Blood of Spain*; and Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 1991). The persistence, even increase, in radical Right and racial hate groups around the world today underscores the need to understand the historical attraction of ordinary people to such politics.

there are few guidelines for using oral history to study the non-elite Right. Traditionally, oral historians have emphasized caution, distance, and objectivity in interviews with members of elites and egalitarianism, reciprocity, and authenticity in interviews with people outside elites. However, this epistemological dichotomy reflects implicit romantic assumptions about the subjects of history from the bottom up—assumptions that are difficult to defend when studying ordinary people who are active in the politics of intolerance, bigotry, or hatred.

The use of oral history to study the far Right also raises more general issues of historical interpretation. The ability of oral history to provide new and accurate insights into the lives and understandings of ordinary people in the past depends on a critical approach to oral evidence and to the process of interviewing. Thus, efforts to formulate an approach to oral history that recognizes the range and complexities of narratives garnered from people outside elites and helps us judge these sources critically can assist historians working with other sources and methods.

In the mid-1980s I interviewed former members of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. These Klan organizations recruited several million men, women, and children across the United States into a political crusade for white, Protestant supremacy. Although the Klan's anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and racist politics ultimately had little effect on a national level, the intense concentration of Klan members in some communities and states allowed the Klan to dictate the outcome of elections, the policies of law enforcement, and the nature of community life in these areas. In Indiana, as many as half a million women and men are estimated to have joined the Klan during the 1920s. In parts of southern and central Indiana where the majority of white, native-born Protestants were Klan members, the Klan controlled nearly every local electoral office, police agency, and school board. In these communities, the Klan terrorized African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants with sporadic incidents of physical violence and with unrelenting intimidation, boycotts, and efforts to terminate from employment, evict from housing, and expel from the community all those it deemed to be an obstacle to an agenda of white Protestant supremacy. In this article, I use interviews with former Klan women and Klansmen from the heavily Klan-dominated communities in Indiana to examine issues of historical interpretation, which I label as evidence, empathy, and ethics.<sup>4</sup>

### Interpreting Evidence from Oral Histories

Oral history can open new vistas of historical understanding, but it can also mislead and confuse. Accounts by those who have participated in campaigns for racial and religious supremacy, for example, often are laced with deceptive information, disingenuous denials of culpability, and dubious assertions about their political motivation. But with careful scrutiny and critical interpretation, even these interviews can yield surprisingly informative and complex historical information.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1991), 4–7, 145–53.



Women of the Ku Klux Klan gather at New Castle, Indiana, on August 1, 1923.  
*Courtesy W. A. Swift Photograph Collection, Archives and Special Collections,  
 Bracken Library, Ball State University.*

One issue that plagues studies of right-wing extremists is the desire of informants to distort their own political pasts. The evidence that such informants present to the oral historian is at once revelatory and unreliable. It is revelatory because, as Paul Thompson recognized, "what the informant believes is indeed a *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really happened.'" But it is also unreliable, as Claudia Salazar notes, because "to debate matters of politics inevitably forces us to look back from the text to the world. . . . This move is fundamental if we want to avoid the entrapments of a purely discursivist stance."<sup>5</sup>

Historical interpretation always requires attention to the partiality, bias, and distortions of any individual's particular historical account when garnering evidence from narratives of direct experience.<sup>6</sup> But reliance upon narrated accounts and memory for historical understanding of right-wing extremists is problematic on another level. In an important discussion of oral history methodology, Alessandro Portelli notes that "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active creation

<sup>5</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York, 1978), 138; Claudia Salazar, "A Third World Woman's Text: Between the Politics of Criticism and Cultural Politics," in *Women's Words*, ed. Gluck and Patai, 102.

<sup>6</sup> Some recent feminist scholarship, however, argues that the greatest possibility for distortion lies in privileging interpretation over direct experience, resulting in an explanatory circle in which experience confirms interpretation and interpretation describes experience. See Dorothy E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston, 1990); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, 1990). On the advantages of working to "listen in a new way," bracketing theories that structure "what to hear and how to interpret," see Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *Women's Words*, ed. Gluck and Patai, 18.

of meanings." Meanings are created in social and political contexts; memory is not a solitary act.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is not simply that narratives constructed by former Klan members to explain their role in one of history's most vicious campaigns of intolerance and hatred are biased by their own political agendas and their desire to appear acceptable to an oral historian but also that informants' memories have been shaped by subsequent public censure of this and later Klans.

The former Klan members that I interviewed all related tales of "clannish" Catholics and Jews, or offensive African Americans, or troublesome immigrants. The tales were recounted as direct experience but were often indistinguishable from the stories manufactured and disseminated by the Klan to justify its crusade for white supremacy. Related in interviews, however, such tales suggest motivations and a self-consciousness about Klan membership that did not exist for most members when they were members. In the Klan's heyday, few members would have felt called upon to put forth reasons—however distorted—for their desire to ensure white Protestant supremacy. In the homogeneous, overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and native-born communities in which the Klan took deepest root, Catholics, African Americans, Jews, and immigrants were simply "others"—so far removed from the social and political life of white Protestants that rationalizations were unnecessary. The inferiority and ominous character of nonwhites and non-Protestants were simply assumed in the receptive population in which the Klan sought recruits. Only later, with the Klan under attack, did stories meant to exonerate its participants appear.<sup>8</sup>

But if interviews of extremists can elicit such distorted accounts, the recovery of narrated experience also, paradoxically, offers the possibility of constructing more accurate explanations of how and why people become attracted to political movements of hatred and bigotry. Oral histories can tap into the complexity of political experiences and beliefs more directly than can documentary sources. They allow us to scrutinize the accounts of political actors, and to probe those experiences, beliefs, and narratives that do not fit conventional historical interpretations, in addition to revealing "the intangible 'atmosphere' of events."<sup>9</sup>

The history of histories of the Klan is a case in point. The voluminous historiography of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan has virtually ignored the role of women in this movement. Standard documentary sources, assembled by contemporaries and historians who assumed that women were politically insignificant, focused entirely on the male Klan. By thus overlooking women's actions in the Klan, historical accounts seemed to confirm that Klan women were minor, incidental players, offering mere window dressing behind which men carried out the real politics of hatred and bigotry.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991), 52; John Bodnar, "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," *Journal of American History*, 75 (March 1989), 1202. See also John A. Neuenschwander, "Remembrance of Things Past: Oral Historians and Long-Term Memory," *Oral History Review*, 6 (1978), 45–53.

<sup>8</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 84–91, 154–57, 171–73.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> For treatments that give little notice to women in the Klan, see Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross* (New

Oral histories of former Klan women, however, tell us otherwise. Women played a significant role in the second Klan's vicious campaigns of rumor, boycotts, and intimidation of African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other minorities. Certain stores, according to my informants, were patronized by Klan women because they were "known to be owned by Ku Klux Klan members." In contrast, one former Klanswoman recalls, businesses owned by Catholics, Jews, and African Americans "were hurt terribly because people wouldn't go in there because the Klan would tell you not to." Informants discussed these boycotts as informal, almost unspoken community norms that governed majority-white, Protestant, and Klan-dominated communities in the 1920s, as did a man who related growing up with just "an understanding that if you rented your farm, you better not rent it to a Catholic."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, oral histories of Klan women reveal that many held complicated attitudes toward gender, race, economics, and nationalism, attitudes that did not fit traditional political categories, such as reactionary or progressive. Ideologies of Klan women in the 1920s were complicated, blending occasional thoughtful, sometimes progressive, views with rigid adherence to dogmas of nationalism, racial hierarchies, or Christian supremacy. Although they slavishly followed the male Klan's politics of white Protestant supremacy, for example, they charted a different political course on issues of gender and women's rights (the rights of white, native-born, and Protestant women, that is).

While the men's Ku Klux Klan promoted traditional views of gender roles, a separate female organization—the Women of the Ku Klux Klan—praised women's rights organizations, the participation of women in the temperance movement, and the extension of the right to vote to women. It promoted the National Woman's Party, supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was first introduced in the 1920s, and celebrated women who "made it" in traditionally male workplaces.<sup>12</sup>

By manipulating the issue of women's rights in this fashion, the women's Klan attempted to link the interests of white, native-born Protestant women to those of the Klan. Its leaders sought to broaden the Klan's appeal to women while obscuring the Klan's agenda of racial and religious hatred. In documentary sources such revealing ambiguities in the ideology of the Klan are erased. It is through oral historical accounts, subject to critical interpretation, that these contradictions can be recovered and explored.

Moreover, the evidence of oral history is embedded not only in narrative accounts but also in the process of interviewing. An informant's mode of presentation can

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York, 1987); and Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill, 1991). For descriptions of some women's Klans, see David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, 1981); and David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 147–53. Anonymous informants in central Indiana, interviews by Kathleen M. Blee, Aug. 26, 1987, Aug. 25, 1987, audiotapes (in Kathleen M. Blee's possession).

<sup>12</sup> On the views of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan toward women's rights, see Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 49–57. Some publications by the women's and men's Klans in which these views are evident are *Fiery Cross*, Dec. 14, 1923, p. 9; *ibid.*, Aug. 15, 1924; *The K.K.K. Katechism: Pertinent Questions, Pointed Answers* (Washington, 1924); and *Imperial Night-Hawk*, Sept. 3, 1924.

be scrutinized for clues to the meanings that historical actors gave to their experiences when they occurred; this was the case when informants rushed to assure me that the Klan was "uplifting," "just a celebration," "a fantastic thing," a group that "gave people a feeling they were doing the right thing." Modes of presentation can be deceptive—oral history approaches can lead unwary scholars to underestimate the devastating effects of far-right and hate-based politics. Claudia Koonz, in her excellent study of women in Nazi Germany, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, for example, argues that in Germany "history recorded the 'bad things'; memory preserved a benign face of fascism." Indeed, the muting of past atrocities may be endemic to the epistemology of oral history. As Cynthia Hay notes, "Oral history has often been criticized on the grounds that it is confined to a cosy view of the past . . . [which can] at best obtain banalities about experiences which were anything but banal."<sup>13</sup>

The benign memories of which Koonz warns arose in many of my interviews with female and male members of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. But unlike Luisa Passerini, who found the pro-Fascist sentiments of Turin workers disguised within "declarations expressing dissociation or distance from the regime," I found that my Klan informants, unless pressed, felt little need to obscure their political beliefs. Although many informants recounted being involved in economic boycotts and threats against Catholic, Jewish, and African-American families and their property, none expressed any consciousness of having done wrong; few seemed even to appreciate why they might be viewed as intolerant or bigoted. Except when defending against the historical condemnation of subsequent generations, they felt no need to explain *why* they found the Klan appealing. To them, life in the Klan was normal, a given, needing no explanation. The only puzzle was why later generations regarded "their Klan" so negatively.<sup>14</sup>

Such mundane reactions are not without value. They can reveal, as well as conceal, the force and terror of this Klan. In areas of the United States in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan so dominated communities in which white Protestants were the majority that Klan life became inseparable from non-Klan life. With the myriad of Klan weddings, baby christenings, teenaged auxiliaries, family picnics, athletic contests, parades, spelling bees, beauty contests, rodeos, and circuses, it is perhaps little wonder that the 1920s Klan is recalled by former members as an ordinary, normal, taken-for-granted part of the life of the white Protestant majority. For members, the Klan defined the fabric of everyday life, at once reinforcing and dictating relations of kinship and friendship and practices of celebration and sorrow.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous informants in central and southern Indiana, interviews by Blee, Aug. 8, 1987, May 13, 1987, Aug. 26, 1987, audiotapes (in Blee's possession); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York, 1987), xix; George C. Wright, "Oral History and the Search for the Black Past in Kentucky," *Oral History Review*, 10 (1982), 86; Cynthia Hay, "The Pangs of the Past," *Oral History Journal*, 9 (Spring 1981), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (New York, 1987), 129.

In the minds of its members, the Klan became understood as little more than "just another club."<sup>15</sup>

The political culture and activities of the Klan so closely paralleled the daily lives of my informants that they could assert, without irony, that "everybody was in the Klan" or that "it was a fun organization . . . like a Halloween parade. You'd mask up, wear sheets and be entertained." This led also to eerily abstracted and contradictory statements by informants, like a woman who insisted that "the one Jew in town, he became part of the community. I don't think anybody ever thought about doing anything to him . . . [but] people didn't go to his store." That a political movement could urge that Americans "put all the Catholics, Jews and Negroes on a raft in the middle of the ocean and then sink the raft" and be remembered by its adherents as an ordinary, unremarkable social club is staggering. Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" is found here—in the millions of people who joined a crusade of violent hatred so easily, so unreflectively. Oral histories are exceptionally sensitive sources for recording the lack of self-consciousness in historical subjects, the sensation of normality and conventionality that fueled the Klan of the 1920s.<sup>16</sup>

But if oral histories can reveal the depth of such unspoken, unacknowledged, everyday hatred and bigotry, such interviews can also be puzzling. Decades after this wave of Klan activity subsided, its former members struggle in interviews to justify their involvement against history's condemnation, to construct—retrospectively and consciously—a narrative of life in the Klan that will exonerate them in the eyes of their children and grandchildren.

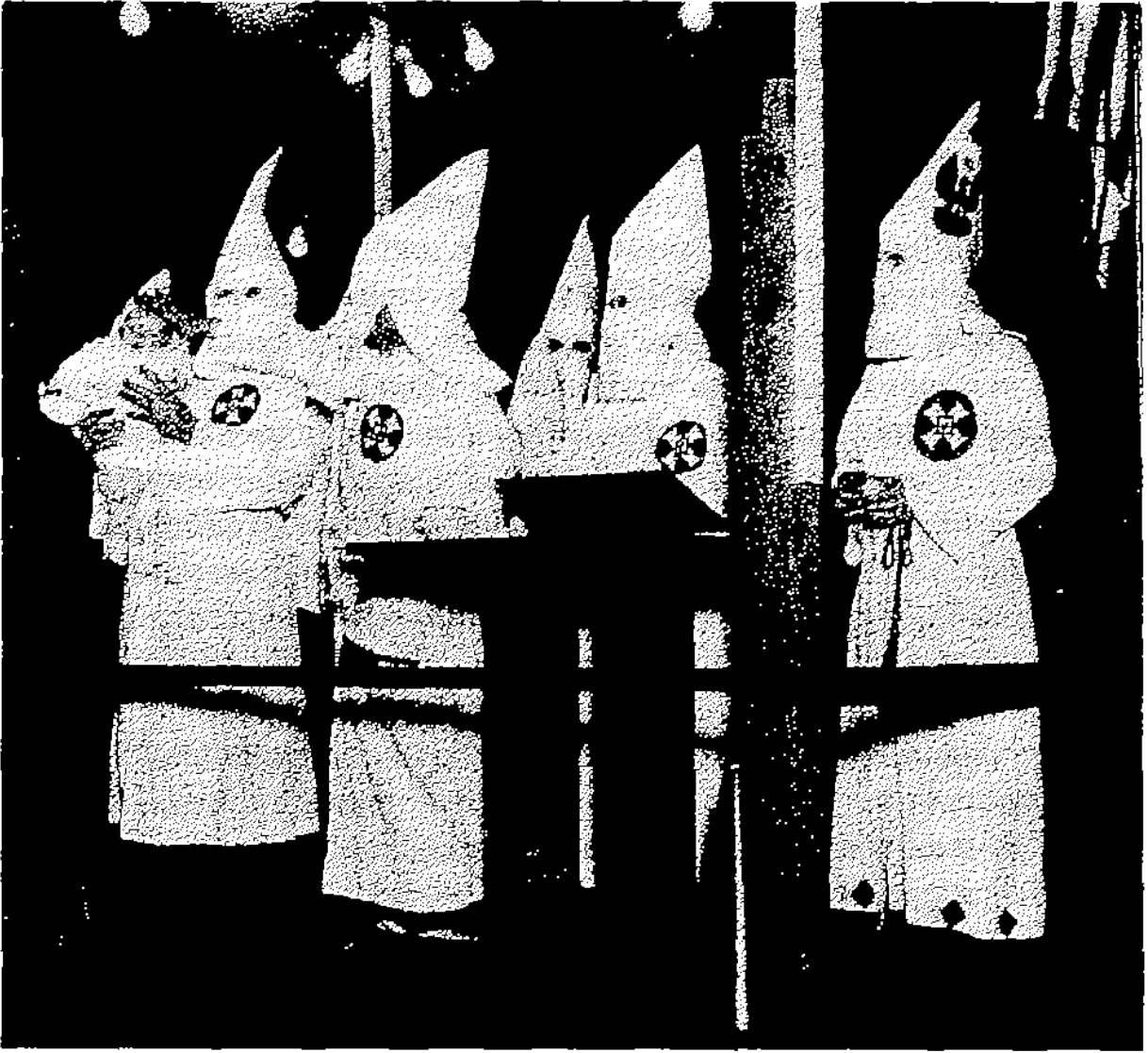
Over and over, I heard implausible and internally contradictory stories of forced enlistment into the Klan. One informant initially claimed that he had no idea what brought him into the Klan, that it was just something that happened to everybody. When I later pressed him to describe his activities in the Klan, he changed stories, declaring that he had been helpless in the face of exceptional pressure to join, and that "there were so many people leaning on me, I had little choice."<sup>17</sup>

Narratives of self-justification nearly always included claims that the Klan was necessary, that it remedied civil ills, and that it was provoked by its very victims. Gabriele Rosenthal found that Germans who witnessed World War II but did not face persecution constructed stories that asserted they were victims. A similar pattern is evident among former Klan members who declared, for instance, that devastating boycotts organized in Klan-dominated communities were necessitated by the financial power of "naturally clannish" Catholics and Jews. Or, that "the colored people were hard to get along with. The white people got along with everybody." The lack of reflectivity and the stress on self-justification in these interviews are outgrowths both of the acceptability of these white supremacist beliefs in certain

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous informant in southern Indiana, interview by Blee, Aug. 21, 1987, audiotape (in Blee's possession); Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 1, 163–71.

<sup>16</sup> Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 150; Egner Willadene, "Whitley County Survives the Ku Klux Klan," *Bulletin of the Whitley County [Indiana] Historical Society* (Oct. 1987), 3–17; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963).

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous informant in central Indiana, interview by Blee, May 13, 1987, audiotape (in Blee's possession).



Ku Klux Klan christening of eight-week-old baby, c. 1924.  
*Courtesy Library of Congress.*

populations at a specific time and of a more conscious effort by partisans to deny the consequences of their political efforts. That denial allowed informants to see their role in the Klan as “great theater” or “entertaining, more exciting than Chatauqua.”<sup>18</sup>

### Empathy and Ethics

Oral histories of the far Right also raise questions about empathy and ethics. Daphne Patai, a women’s studies scholar and oral historian, notes that many feminist scholars have replaced the “model of a distanced, controlled, and ostensibly neutral inter-

<sup>18</sup> Gabriele Rosenthal, “German War Memories: Narrability and the Biographical and Social Functions of Remembering,” *Oral History*; 19 (Autumn 1991), 39–40; Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 150, 156; anonymous informants in southern Indiana, interviews by Blee, May 24, 1987, Aug. 27, 1987, audiotapes (in Blee’s possession).



viewer" with that of "an engaged and sympathetic interaction between two individuals." Further, feminist principles of oral history can foster a "fear of forcing or manipulating individuals into discussing topics they did not want to talk about."<sup>19</sup> While such concerns are often overlooked in interviews with elites, where the relationship between interviewer and informant is assumed to be unequal and possibly adversarial, empathy can also be problematic in oral histories of ordinary people. Here again, principles that serve well for studying sympathetic informants can prove immobilizing with members of hate groups. Would it be possible, to say nothing of desirable, to create an empathic environment when interviewing Klan members?

Some argue that the researcher should strive for rapport with any informant to maximize the information that can be garnered from the interview, even at the expense of downplaying or forgoing sensitive topics. Based on his experience interviewing Gerald L. K. Smith, for example, Glen Jeansonne cautions that the oral historian "should not place himself or herself in an adversary relationship unless it is unavoidable" and that "it is best to leave the subject a graceful exit and not ask tough questions back to back."<sup>20</sup>

In my interviews with former Klan members, however, I made few efforts to establish such rapport or to shy away from controversial topics. Indeed, I was prepared to hate and fear my informants, to find them repellent and, more important, strange. I expected no rapport, no shared assumptions, no commonality of thought or experience. Moreover, I expected them to be wary of me and reluctant to express their true attitudes. But this was not the case. Instead of participating reluctantly in the interviews, these former Klan members seemed quite at ease. (This openness was due in part to the fact that I found informants through advertisements in local publications and contacts with local historians and civic leaders. As self-identified former Klan members willing to talk with me about their experiences, they are not necessarily representative of all who participated in the 1920s Klan.)

The apparent ease of rapport in these interviews stemmed largely from the informants' own racial stereotypes. These elderly informants found it impossible to imagine that I—a native of Indiana and a white person—would not agree, at least secretly, with their racist and bigoted world views. Even challenging their beliefs had no effect on their willingness to talk. They simply discounted my spoken objections as "public talk" and carried on the "private talk" they assumed was universal among whites.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, even my assumptions about how I would experience the interviews were incorrect. Far from being the stock characters of popular portrayals of Klan members—uniformly reactionary, red-neck, mean, ignorant, operating by an irra-

<sup>19</sup> Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?," in *Women's Words*, ed. Gluck and Patai, 143; Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen," 13.

<sup>20</sup> Glen Jeansonne, "Oral History, Biography, and Political Demagoguery: The Case of Gerald L. K. Smith," *Oral History Review*, 11 (1983), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Claudia Koonz makes a similar point about her interview with Gertrud Sholtz-Klink, chief of the German Nazi women's bureau: "I wondered that people would be so open in their defense of the Nazi state." See Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, xviii.

tional and incomprehensible logic—many of the people I interviewed were interesting, intelligent, and well informed.

Although it might be comforting if we could find no commonality of thought or experience with those who are drawn into far-right politics, my interviews suggest a more complicated and a more disturbing reality. It was fairly ordinary people—people with considered opinions, people who loved their families and could be generous to neighbors and friends—who were the mainstay of the 1920s Klan. Ordinary women and men sustained this deadly outburst against those they saw as different and threatening.

Oral historians are acutely sensitive to the meaning of silences in the narrative and to barriers to communication between us and our informants.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in my interviews with Klan members it was the *lack* of silence and the *ease* of communication that revealed their world views. Such seeming empathy was fraudulent—supported by my informants' inability to understand that racial politics could differ among those who shared a common racial heritage and by my unwillingness to violate the tenuous empathy that propelled the interviews along. Nonetheless, rapport with politically abhorrent informants can be surprisingly, and disturbingly, easy to achieve in oral history interviews.

Closely related to the dilemma of empathy are ethical issues about the knowledge generated in oral histories of those on the far right. Rarely do researchers question the value of historical scholarship. Indeed, historical research, far more than work in the social, natural, or physical sciences, is often viewed as at least harmless, more often liberating. This is particularly true of the social histories and oral histories that seek to empower contemporary groups with authentic accounts of the lives and struggles of their forefathers and foremothers.

Oral historians agree that people try to make sense of events by placing them in narratives, in story lines.<sup>23</sup> Is it not possible that oral histories may help informants construct a narrative that “makes sense” of the Klan and its actions? After interviewing a female Nazi leader, Koonz reflected:

I realized that I had come to get information and she intended to give me a sanitized version of Nazism that would normalize the Hitler state in the minds of contemporaries. She saw the chance to share her views with an American as a way of taking her message to not only a younger generation, but a new audience.<sup>24</sup>

Feminist scholars insist that a researcher cannot be content merely to record another's life story for scholarly publication but must “return the research” to the subject as a means of empowering the informant and his or her community and thereby leveling the inherent inequality between researcher and subject.<sup>25</sup> But is this

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dolores Janiewski, “‘Sisters under Their Skin?': The Effects of Race upon the Efforts of Women Tobacco Workers to Organize in Durham, North Carolina,” *Oral History*, 7 (Autumn 1979), 31. See also Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, xxii.

<sup>25</sup> For a cogent discussion and critique of this position, see Patai, “U.S. Academics and Third World Women,” 147.

ethical principle, too, based on romantic assumptions about the consequences of fortifying the political agendas of ordinary people? Does this principle serve any purpose in an oral history of the Klan?

For this issue, there is no easy solution. It seems obvious that a researcher should not actively *seek* to empower the Klan.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps the nature of oral history research—here eliciting and conducting interviews with former Klan members—itself empowers informants, by suggesting to them, and to their political descendants, the importance of the Klan in American history. An oral historian of civil rights activists in New Orleans wrote of her informants, “Their interview narratives became monuments to the personal acts of making history. They defined and understood their personal experience as history itself.” The hazards of similarly empowering a political vision of racial and religious hatred are all too clear.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, interviews and oral histories should not be used uncritically in the study of contemporary racism and political extremism. Here, the case of David Duke—repackaged former leader of the Ku Klux Klan and the National Association for the Advancement of White People—is instructive. Massive media attention to Duke’s electoral efforts in the 1980s and early 1990s in Louisiana netted hundreds of interviews with Duke supporters. Yet, taken together, these interviews were dangerously misleading. Those who consented or who even sought to be interviewed were almost uniformly lower middle-class, poorly educated, and inarticulate.

But the near election of a former Klansman to statewide office was not fueled by these people, nor necessarily by forces of ignorance or economic marginality. The structure of institutionalized racism into which Duke tapped, and even the votes that nearly gave him the keys to Louisiana’s gubernatorial mansion, lay deep within educated, middle-class, mainstream white Louisiana. Interviews with those unsavvy or unrestrained enough to utter racist sentiments on camera or before a tape recorder are of limited value—and indeed can create a distorted image of racial hatred—unless they are placed in the context of institutionalized racism.

Similarly, the mainstay of the 1920s Klan was not the pathological individual; rather the Klan effectively tapped a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and bigotry deep within the white Protestant population. My interviews with former Klan members shed light on how and why ordinary people might become attracted to the politics of racial hatred. However, they do not reveal much about racism itself—how it is generated and how it becomes embedded in the institutions of modern society. An accurate and politically effective understanding of the politics of hatred and right-wing extremism must be developed on two levels—as the racial, class, or national prejudices held by individuals and as the institutionalized practices and structures whereby these attitudes are empowered and reproduced over time.<sup>28</sup> In this effort, oral history accounts, used with caution and attention to their limitations, can play a significant role.

<sup>26</sup> Even this principle is not always followed. Glen Jeansonne secured an interview with the famous anti-Semitic demagogue Gerald L. K. Smith in part through correspondence that “consistently stressed to him the importance of his career.” Jeansonne, “Oral History, Biography, and Political Demagoguery,” 92.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Salazar, “A Third World Woman’s Text,” 96; Kim Lacy Rogers, “Memory, Struggle, and Power: On Interviewing Political Activists,” *Oral History Review*, 15 (Spring 1987), 182.

<sup>28</sup> See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca, 1991), 214.

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