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BECOMING A RACIST
Women in Contemporary
Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups

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This article examines how women members of contemporary U.S. racist groups reconcile the male-oriented agendas of organized racism with understandings of themselves and their gendered self-interests. Using life history narratives and in-depth interviews, the author examines how women racial activists construct self-understandings that fit agendas of the racist movement and how they reshape understandings of movement goals to fit their own beliefs and life experiences. This analysis situates the political actions of women racists in rational, if deplorable, understandings of self and society.

The study of organized racism is deeply, but invisibly, gendered. From the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan to contemporary neo-Nazis, the committed racist appears as male. Women racists exist in shadow, lurking behind husbands and boyfriends. A recent social psychology of modern racist activists gives an account of Raymond, a longtime adherent of violent white supremacy. At the edge of Raymond’s story appears his “dreadfully myopic” girlfriend:

Rosandra would stoop over the sink in the gloom, doing dishes. I have never seen a dish sink so poorly lit; there was perhaps a fifteen-watt bulb. Given that bad light and her terrible vision, she would have to bring the plate within a few inches of her eyes to see it well enough to wash it. Rosandra became pregnant almost at once: Raymond “didn’t believe in” contraception. (Ezekiel 1995, 244)

Nothing in this narrative allows the reader to understand Rosandra’s place, if any, in the racist movement, nor her motivation to maintain a relationship with Raymond. She appears directionless, manipulated, and victimized.

This depiction of Rosandra is typical of scholarly and popular media accounts of women in racist groups. Women are seen as apolitical in their own right, attached

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to the racist movement only through the political affiliations of their husbands, boyfriends, or fathers. The logic is circular: Organized racism is a male province. Women who join must be the ideological appendages of racist men. Thus, women's attitudes, actions, and motivations are derivative, incidental, and not worthy of scholarly consideration. What is important about organized racism is knowable by studying men.

As a result of such reasoning, scholarship on women in modern racist groups in the United States is virtually nonexistent (Blee 1996; West and Blumberg 1990)—although studies of women in the 1920s' Ku Klux Klan (Blee 1991) and in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain (Ware 1992), contemporary Hindu fascism in India (Mazumdar 1995), the German Nazi movement (Koonz 1987), and World War II-era Italian fascism (De Grazia 1992) find that women have not been incidental to reactionary, racist, and anti-Semitic movements. Examinations of rightist movements that are not specifically racist in orientation, such as those opposing abortion or gender equality, also conclude that women have played significant and active roles in many groups (Chafetz and Dworkin 1987; Conover and Gray 1984; De Hart 1991; Klatch 1987; Luker 1984; Marshall 1986).

The lack of specific attention to contemporary U.S. women racist activists has two consequences that limit our ability to understand the modern racist movement and that undermine efforts to design effective strategies against the politics of organized racial, religious, and ethnic bigotry. First, the common (but unexamined) assumption that women are not active in the racist movement, or that such movements are restricted to men, has made it difficult to explain the adherence of substantial numbers of women to organized racism today. In the past decade, the number of racist groups in the United States has increased dramatically, which is due in large part to efforts to broaden and diversify membership beyond the small enclaves of Southern white male supporters who traditionally formed the nucleus of militant racism (Center for Democratic Renewal 1990-94; Ridgeway 1990; Rose 1992; Southern Poverty Law Center 1985-95, 1990-95). Such strategies, and the resultant public visibility of organized racism, have shaped a modern racist movement in which women constitute an estimated 25 percent of the membership (and nearly 50 percent of new recruits) in many groups.²

Women are particularly active in some neo-Nazi groups, especially in those, like racist skinheads, whose members tend to be younger and less bound by the male-exclusive practices of many earlier racist movements. Although small Nazi chapters who trace their ideological lineage to World War II-era Nazis still exist, the more rapidly growing segment of the Nazi movement consists of violently racist and anti-Semitic "skinheads" modeled after similar earlier groups in England and Canada. The so-called Christian Identity sects are a network of theological communities that regard Jews and African Americans as the offspring of Satan and white Christians as the true lost tribe of Israel (Barkun 1994; Bennett 1988; Bjorgo 1993; Christensen 1994; Dobe 1992; Eatwell and O'Sullivan 1989; Hamm 1993; Himmelstein 1990; Levin and McDevitt 1993; Merkl and Weinberg 1993; Weinberg 1993).
Women also are actively sought as members by the Ku Klux Klan, which is now splintered into at least two dozen competing Klans, many with strategic alliances to neo-Nazi groups. For the Klan, women not only serve as additional bodies in a crusade for white, Christian supremacy but are key to stabilizing membership among men. A Southern Klan leader’s description of his rationale for pursuing women recruits is typical:

In order to bring in men, the men will follow the women. If a wife is against the husband’s being involved, you can just about, you know, forget the husband hanging around for long. . . . The other way, if the wife is into it, she’ll drag the husband along. I’ve seen that too many times to ignore it, so we don’t hold women back from promotions or climbing the ladder. We can’t afford to not let them have whatever positions they want to work for.¹

But if women increasingly are active and visible within the organized racist and anti-Semitic movement, they seldom are found in positions of power. Some groups, like Christian Identity sects, assign women an overtly separate, subordinate, and ancillary role within the movement as the helpmates of men and the nurterers of the next generation. Others—such as some white power skinheads and Aryan neo-Nazi groups and a few Klans—espouse a more gender-inclusive organizational ideology, but even in these only a few women have developed significant, autonomous positions. In addition, the agenda of most (but not all) groups supports very traditional familial and political roles for white Aryan women, although this is increasingly less true for racist skinheads and other neo-Nazi groups.² Nonetheless, women constitute a significant component of the membership, and a small but important part of the leadership, in today’s organized racist groups. The lack of attention to such women distorts, and may cause us to seriously underestimate, the destructive potential of this movement.

Second, the exclusive attention to men in organized racist movements has deformed theoretical understanding of the process whereby individuals become racial activists. Explanations of rightist affiliation tend to take several forms. Some theories interpret right-wing participation as an outgrowth of individual or collective social-psychological factors. Perhaps the most noted of these is Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s (1950) thesis that individuals with low tolerance for ambiguity and a high need for rigid, stereotyped views (i.e., the “authoritarian personality”) are attracted to the uncomplicated, authoritative, and conspiratorial ideologies that characterize right-wing extremism. Hofstadter’s (1965) frequently cited characterization of a “paranoid style” in rightist politics also emphasizes the connection between psychological factors and political ideologies of the Right by suggesting that the conspiratorial claims that buttress many right-wing political arguments represent the projection of individual pathologies into public life.

Such works have engendered familiar understandings of adherence to extremist right-wing movements as the outgrowth of authoritarian parenting, educational deficits, personal ignorance, or irrational prejudices, and led to the presumption that
most participants in rightist politics are irrational, frustrated, or deluded (Brinkley 1993). Although explanations based on deficiencies and pathologies remain standard in commonsense understandings of far-right politics, they have lost favor with researchers, in part because such theories have been unable to explain the variation among, and the historically rapid growth and decline of, right-wing extremist groups in the United States and elsewhere (see Billig 1978, 46-7).

Theories of “status politics,” developed in a series of studies of McCarthyism and other rightist movements of the 1950s, attempted to address the explanatory limitations of personality-based theories. They argued that radical right-wing movements are best understood as collective reactive efforts to safeguard threatened social statuses or group values. According to one common version of this theory, right-wing groups gain adherents from among those who experience a gap between their expected and actual status and power and thus deeply resent current social arrangements. Such status inconsistencies and anxieties then can be mobilized and projected onto symbolic political targets, even those far removed from the actual causes of discontent (Bell 1964; Lipset 1964). Protestant fundamentalists in an era of religious liberalism, for example, could express their frustrations through crusades against secular education, and small business owners in a period of corporate consolidation might be susceptible to anticommmunist movements.

A number of excellent studies of women in conservative and antifeminist movements draw on these ideas of status and symbolic politics, arguing that the mobilization of women into “new right” and antiabortion movements is essentially a reaction to progressive and feminist social gains, especially to the perceived resultant threat to the status of homemaker (e.g., Conover and Gray 1984; Petchesky 1981). Luker’s (1984) examination of the antiabortion movement, for example, meticulously uncovers the language of symbolic politics around which women are mobilized to oppose abortion to defend the social status, lifestyle, and worldviews of mothers and homemakers (see also Ginsburg 1987).

A theoretical approach based in solely status and symbolic politics, however, is problematic in the study of racist movements. Many racist groups (especially neo-Nazis) draw their adherents from fairly class-heterogeneous populations and from among employed women as well as housewives, from mothers and wives as well as single women. In addition, many racist groups fluctuate over time less than would be predicted from status or reactive theories. And racist movements, more so than antifeminist or conservative movements, are unlikely to displace their concerns onto distant political targets. For most in the racist movement, African Americans (or Jews, Asian Americans, etc.) are both the intended and the actual target of political mobilization.

Scholars have also sought to develop theories that link participation in extremist right-wing movements more closely to rational interests, moving away from symbolic and ideological levels of explanation. A number of studies of World War II-era fascist movements, for instance, have explored the connections between Nazi and Italian fascist party platforms and the economic interests of their
supporters (Brustein 1991; Brustein and Markovsky, 1989). In the United States, Himmelstein (1990) and others have argued that parts of the modern U.S. Right were a product of corporate opposition to New Deal and collectivist policies. Such theories are especially promising for the study of racist politics because they challenge the idea that rightist politics are essentially reactive— and thus episodic, fleeting, and confined to groups that see themselves as immediately threatened. Instead, these theories highlight the connections between rightist or racist ideologies and the perceived enduring interests of specific groups in society.

Feminist scholarship, too, has drawn on interest-based theories, often in combination with status theories. Marshall’s (1986, 1984) important studies of antifemale suffrage and modern antifeminist movements and Klatch’s (1987) innovative research on “social conservatives” and “laissez-faire conservatives” are two examples of works that situate the political affiliations of conservative women within both rational understandings of their gendered interests (as housewives or as employed women) and anxieties about perceived threats to female social roles.

In studies of racist movements, however, the calculation of group interests is difficult and traditionally has been intensely gendered. Most studies of organized racism that seek to establish an interest-based account do so by highlighting the connection between certain tenets of rightist/racist ideology— especially individualism, antegalitarianism, nationalism, and moralism/traditionalism—and the social and economic positions of their adherents (Betz 1994; Hamm 1993; MacLean 1994; Weinberg 1993). According to this approach, organized racism flourishes when people embrace individualism as a legitimate, rational means to preserve or construct their authority over members of their households; antegalitarianism to guard against competition for jobs or resources; nationalism to strengthen political identities of citizenship; and moralism/traditionalism to justify nuclear, patriarchal, and inegalitarian family and social structures. In this view, participation in rightist/racist politics can be understood as rational when the agendas of rightist/racist groups work to advantage the social or economic positions of their adherents.

Through a feminist lens, it is clear that such claims of rational action implicitly rest on a view of right-wing and racist activists as white Christian men. Although women constitute a substantial element of conservative and rightist politics, both historically and in the contemporary United States, few women hold the social and economic positions that are said to provide a rational base for right-wing action. Most women would not gain from the enhancement of patriarchal privileges. Women have little identity-stake in the concepts of citizen from which they have been historically excluded. Moralism and fears of intergroup competition do not uniquely motivate women to join right-wing movements since these also form the basis for many women’s rights and antielitist struggles. This leaves a dichotomous—and unsatisfactory—explanation: Men enlist in right-wing and racial politics to preserve or extend their obvious, identifiable interests and privileges; women join because they are confused, led astray by male intimates or incorrectly identify their interests with those of the extreme Right. Such gender-dichotomous explanations—
essentially again attributing to women’s racist activity in psychological and relational factors—are unable to account for historical fluctuations and variability in women’s participation in racial politics.

In this article, I attempt to address these problems by examining what happens when women join racist movements—how women reconcile the male-oriented agendas of the racist movement with understandings of themselves and their gendered self-interests. By so doing, I situate the political actions of women racists in rational, if deplorable, understandings of self and society.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data are from in-depth interviews with 34 women racist activists conducted between September 1994 and October 1995. I began this study by collecting and reading a one-year series of all newsletters, magazines, flyers, and recordings of music and speeches published by every currently active self-proclaimed white power, white supremacist, white separatist, Ku Klux Klan, skinhead, Nazi/neo-Nazi, and similar group that I could identify through existing lists of racist groups, through personal contacts with self-proclaimed racist activists, and through reference in racist periodicals. This resulted in a collection of publications by more than 100 different groups, most with items issued at least two or more times during the year. Through these publications, I identified all groups that claimed significant numbers of women members or that identified at least one woman as a spokesperson or leader. These groups became a sampling frame for this study. From this list of groups, I selected approximately 30 that varied in regional location, age of member, and type of group.

This approach allowed me to identify groups with women activists but did not produce names of specific members since racist activists generally use aliases or code names (e.g., “Viking Mary”) in their publications. I was able to make contact and secure interviews with several women activists directly through their groups. Such a direct approach was, however, inadvisable for most groups because they are highly suspicious and hostile to unknown outsiders. To secure the majority of interviews, I relied on a more indirect approach, using personal networks, including parole officers, correctional officials, newspaper reporters, other racist activists and former activists, federal and state gang task forces, attorneys, other researchers, and my own contacts with individuals in this movement to make contacts with individual members of the targeted groups. Initial interviews with a few key informants gave me additional entrée to other racist activists. Throughout, I continued to select respondents from groups in the original sample list rather than by pursuing a snowball sample or a sample of convenience to ensure variability in experience and perspective. As much as possible, I selected respondents of disparate ages who held different positions or had varying levels of commitment to the racist movement.
Respondents included 4 leaders who are known both within the movement and outside, 10 leaders who are not known publicly, and 20 rank-and-file members of racist groups. They ranged in age from 16 to 90, with a median age of 24. In general, members of the Ku Klux Klan groups were older and skinheads were younger, but one informant, the editor of a skinhead newsletter, was in her 80s and several Klanswomen were in their early 20s. The respondents lived in 15 different states, with the greatest concentrations in Georgia (6), Oklahoma (5), Oregon (4), and Florida (4). They were dispersed across regions as well, with 11 from the South, 10 from the West Coast, 10 from the Midwest, and 3 from the East Coast.

Contrary to the prediction from both psychological and status-based theories that economic marginality prompts racist activism, the majority of informants held middle-class jobs (e.g., as occupational therapists, nurses, teachers, and librarians), were attending college, or were not employed but were married to stably employed men. About one-third could be described as living in economically precarious conditions—holding jobs as waitresses, lay ministers in tiny, nonaffiliated churches, or teachers in marginal private schools; or being married to insecurely employed men. Significantly, in almost half of these cases, it is clear from the life histories that peripheral employment was a consequence rather than a cause, of involvement in racist politics. Some women (or their husbands) lost their jobs when employers found out about their racist involvement or when they were caught proselytizing racism to customers or fellow employees. Others sought employment within racist enclaves, for example, as teachers in Christian Identity schools, to escape what they regarded as the nefarious influences of the outside world and to contribute to the future of the racist movement.

Women had a variety of reasons for participating in the study. Some may have hoped initially that the interview would generate publicity for their groups or themselves—a common motivation for granting interviews to the media—although, to avoid this, I made it clear that no personal or organizational names would appear in the research. Many respondents seemed to view the interview as an opportunity to explain their racial politics to a white outsider, even one who was decidedly unsympathetic to their arguments. To them, it was personally important that the outside world be given an accurate (even if negative) account to counter superficial media reports that portray racial activists as uniformly deranged or ignorant. Others agreed to interviews to support or challenge what they imagined I had been told in earlier interviews with racist comrades or competitors. Also, despite their deep antagonism toward authority figures, others (especially the younger women) may have participated in the study because they were flattered to have their opinions solicited by a university professor or because they had rarely encountered someone older and middle-class who talked with them without being patronizing, threatening, or directive.

The boundaries of many racist groups today are quite fluid and respondents typically move in and out of a number of groups over time. Thus, few respondents can be definitely characterized by a single group membership, or even by a single
philosophical position. If respondents are categorized according to their most significant involvement with an organized racist group, they include 14 neo-Nazis (other than skinheads), 6 members of Ku Klux Klans, 8 white power skinheads, and 6 members of Christian Identity or similar white supremacist groups.

Gathering accurate information about the lives of members of organized racist groups is notoriously difficult. Racist activists tend to be disingenuous, secretive, intimidating to researchers, and prone to give evasive or dishonest answers. Standard interviews often are unproductive, yielding little more than organizational slogans repeated as personal beliefs (Blee 1993). Group propaganda, too, can be misleading because it is often wielded as much for its shock value as to express the group’s agenda or collective beliefs (Bjorgo 1993). In addition, typical interviews and questionnaires yield information in such a way that makes it impossible to disentangle cause and effect. For example, women racial activists often identify their boyfriends or husbands as being part of the racial movement, reinforcing the perception that women are recruited into racist groups as the girlfriends or wives of male activists. But it is equally plausible that intimate relationships between women and men racist activists are formed within the racist movement; that is, that women form ties to those who have beliefs and ideas similar to their own (Aho 1990).

A life history approach overcomes many of these methodological problems. By beginning with the respondent’s own life story rather than with questions of belief or organizational commitment, respondents are less likely to present group dogma as personal sentiment. The focus on life histories is particularly well-suited to understanding the sequence and patterning of life events and thereby untangling causes and effects of political affiliation. Also, unlike the more common attention to political mobilization in discrete periods of intense collective action, life histories can capture the rhythm of social movement participation and withdrawal over an individual’s lifetime. They illuminate both the events that crystallize consciousness and mobilize action and the social structures and networks that nourish (or fail to nourish) activist identities and beliefs during periods of political inactivity.

Life history interviewing also generates personal narratives, what Hart described as “analogous to a story with a beginning, middle and end; with a plot; with main characters, scoundrels and paragons; and with background settings” (1992, 634). Such stories provide a route to understanding the motivations and self-understandings of actors (like racist activists) who are otherwise reluctant or unable to disclose the intersection of their personal biography with their ideological worldview. As Somers contends, “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (1994, 606). (See also Bruner 1991; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Life history narratives by women racial activists thus reveal how these women “make sense” of their world and their place in that world—how they identify themselves; what they perceive as the major events and significant turning points of their lives; how they understand their own racial
activism and racist beliefs; and how they define themselves in relation to political issues, to other racial or religious groups, and to the racist movement.

The extensive life history interviews that constitute the data for this study followed a common format. At the beginning of each interview, I asked each woman to tell the story of her life, how she came to be where and who she is today. To observe how each woman would compose her own life story—how she would select and causally connect the events that she regarded as most significant—I did not intervene to suggest particular directions in the narrative but only to encourage a full exposition of her life. After the conclusion of the life history, each respondent was asked a series of questions about her education, work history, family background, recruitment and entry into racist politics, role in the racist movement, beliefs, and personal contacts. In this part of the interview, careful attention was paid to constructing a precise chronological account of the respondent’s life, especially the sequence of events prior and immediately subsequent to her first affiliation with an organized racist group. The resulting interviews ranged from two to six hours in length. They were taped and later transcribed. A few informants would not permit me to interview them in person and instead completed written life histories and questionnaires.

It is impossible to create an accurate sampling frame of a secretive movement, so the respondents do not represent a random sample of women who are involved in organized racist groups. Nevertheless, interviews with these women do represent the most comprehensive data existing on modern U.S. women racist activists. They provide an in-depth look at the self-perceptions, motivations, and understandings of women at different levels of involvement in racist and anti-Semitic groups. Because all the life histories collected for this study are from women, they do not reveal gender differences among racist activists but they do indicate specific ways in which women create a place for themselves in the traditionally male sphere of racist politics. Also, the way in which women racists describe their entrance into racist politics and how they present themselves and give meaning to their actions in an interview situation are gendered in important ways.

**FINDINGS**

What happens when women join racist groups? What is it about their lives, as they reveal them, that seems to coincide with the agenda of racist politics? How do they tailor their understanding of self or of racial politics to “make sense” of racist commitments? Life histories reveal some of the means by which women activists establish a rational basis for their participation in racist groups through strategies of conversion, selective adoption, and resignation. Each strategy represents attempts by women activists to create coherent personal narratives by actively reconfiguring the “fit” between themselves and the goals of the racist movement.
Conversion

One way that women activists create a rational basis for their involvement in organized racism is by retrospectively constructing their entry into racial politics as the outgrowth of dramatic personal transformation. Reflecting back on an earlier, nonpolitical life, these women come to view their current political commitments as the result of a single sensational event or series of events through which their personal goals and beliefs became fused with the agendas of the racial movement. In the life histories, accounts of personal transformation typically take the form of a conversion story, not unlike the accounts of those who have been converted to religion, sobriety, or feminism (see Bearman and Stovel 1993; Brereton 1991; Cain 1991; Goldberg 1990; Hart 1992). As converts to racial activism, these women construct the stories of their lives as narratives of passage from racial naïveté to racist enlightenment. In such conversion stories, the more mundane details of actual recruitment to racist groups fall to the wayside. What is highlighted—indeed, what is remembered—in the life narratives is a sense of self-transformation.

Such racial “awareness” is more often a consequence of association with members of racist groups than a cause motivating participation. Of the 34 respondents, more than one-third (13) were recruited into the movement by friends or acquaintances (such as fellow “bikers”); another 10 were convinced to join by parents, siblings, cousins, or children. Three were recruited through a husband or boyfriend. Only 8 (less than one-quarter) sought out contact with the racist movement themselves, on the basis of prior ideological conviction. For most, conversion to the principles of racist activism followed from personal association with other racists and from participation in racist actions, not the reverse. Conversion stories thus cannot be taken as a literal account of ideological transformation but rather provide respondents with an ordered and agentic undergirding to what otherwise might seem a disorderly, even chaotic, series of life events and decisions (see Rosenthal 1991, 36). And they accord intent, calculation, and meaning to radically changing self-identities.

In line with racist ideologies that radically separate “us” from “them,” activists’ conversion stories usually assume a dichotomous narrative form. They relate the abandonment of a previous weak, distorted, ignorant, directionless, and naive self and the construction of an all-knowing, committed, impassioned self. The narratives pivot around a precise event of decisive awakening, in which the essential difference between good and evil, between clarity and confusion, and between likeness and otherness is revealed and explained.

Related abstractly as rationales for subsequent racial activism, respondents’ conversion stories imply a singular and personal experience that crystallized understanding and prompted a voyage of discovery, a passage from darkness into light. In the conversion narratives, activists claim that this experience made them acutely aware that Jews—or African Americans or government agents—caused and controlled the economy, or politics—or even the minutiae of daily life. For nearly all informants, the narrative of conversion pivoted on a single dramatic life
event—a near-death experience, loss of a loved one, even the death of a pet—an ordeal that clarified perception, sharpened value priorities, and seemed to reveal the racial and ethnic dynamics of history.

Alice, a 23-year-old racist skinhead, interviewed on death row in a Southern state where she was incarcerated for a series of murders and robberies, cited a car accident as her personal turning point, after which “it’s like, my whole attitude changed . . . my mind focused more on white supremacy.” “Since the day I was born,” Alice recalled, she had been taught racist attitudes by her parents, but, like them, she had never felt the inclination to act on those beliefs until she awoke from a coma after her car accident. In Alice’s narrative, descriptions of the loss of control she felt as a hospital patient—“TVs in my arms, tubes in my nose”—blurred together with images of African American nurses surrounding her bedside, probing and invading her body. Assertions of self against institutional dehumanization and bodily invasion thus took on a racialized cast for which her earlier belief system served as an ideological template: “I said [to the African American nurses] ‘don’t touch me. Don’t get near me . . . leave me alone.’” It was this incident, she concluded, that brought her into permanent “racial awareness” and that set the stage for her subsequent involvement in neo-Nazi gangs. Indeed, Alice’s narrative of life after her hospitalization reflected this new sense of racial commitment. Speaking of a cousin who married an African American man, she recalled that before the accident she saw family loyalty as more important than racial background, but after her racial “awakening,” “that was it . . . I walked out the door and I haven’t spoken to her since.”

Other conversion-by-near-death stories embedded the antecedents, rather than the outcomes, of personal catastrophe in racial terms. Typical of this was the life history narrative of Judy, a very prominent middle-aged Aryan leader on the East Coast. For her, racial commitment was born when she was seriously injured in a hit-and-run accident while living in an impoverished area of Cleveland.

Initially, Judy’s life story provided little hint that racism and racial activism would become pivotal in her life. Instead, her initial life narrative revolved around issues of domesticity—pregnancy, marriage, child rearing—and a determination to avoid social issues by remaining wrapped within the family and following her parent’s advice: “Don’t be prejudiced, try to get along, do your best you can do.” Even a series of personal calamities—a miscarriage, divorce, and rapid downward economic mobility for herself and her two small children—did not transform Judy’s account of herself as determined and self-possessed.

It is when Judy took her children to Cleveland in search of better employment that her narrative shifts. Now, it is the accident—and the racial implications that followed from it—that becomes the fulcrum around which her life story unfolds. All discussion of her time in Cleveland is antecedent to the accident, subsequent racial activism flows from the accident. Taking nearly an hour to relate, Judy’s accident story provides a dramatic illustration of how racist understandings can be constructed through personal experiences.
In the first part of the Cleveland story, Judy gave a long description of the struggle to maintain a "decent" life amid the squalor of the neighborhood, providing a bridge between a preaccident self-assurance and a postaccident racial awareness. Judy presents herself as confident, but also, in retrospect, as naive about "the neighborhood."

Now, mind you, the neighborhood is not good at all. But I'm thinking, okay, no problem. I just started this job... I'll stay here 'til the end of summer, by winter I'm straight, I got myself a good job, I can transfer my job. I reestablish myself and then I'll be back on towards [another neighborhood], which is a very good area.

Thus far, the neighborhood is described without racial attribution. It is "not good at all," but the referent for this judgment is economic ("I'll stay here 'til... I got myself a good job") rather than racial. As the story progressed toward the accident, however, its protagonists became less abstract and more racialized: The hard work of Whites (to get to work, to keep a job, to find baby-sitters) was counterposed against the inactivity of neighboring African Americans. Now, racial factors are clear. "They" are responsible for the "bad" neighborhood, and to Judy, "they" are Black.

I want to make my money and get the hell out of this bad neighborhood. And it was bad, but I thought, "Oh, I can do this, I'll just be real quiet and they won't mess with me and they won't have no problem with me anyway." (laugh) Well, then the Blacks started to holler after me when they catch me coming in and out,... And it's like, "Hey," you know, "Hey, Woman, we want you come on down here. What you got, don't talk to Black people?" You know, I was just trying to mind my own business.

Why did Judy's increasingly firm racial attitudes translate into racial activism? According to Judy's account, it is because she changed. Her ability to maintain harmony and to ignore the retrospectively obvious proclivity of her African American neighbors for crime and indolence had depended on racial naiveté. Once she became more "aware," such unconscious acceptance was no longer possible. The car accident then became the narrative moment that destroyed Judy's innocence and began a process of self-transformation. Key to this process was her certainty that "they" were responsible for the accident. Although she acknowledges that she did not see the driver who hit her, Judy nonetheless maintained that it "must have been" an African American man from a neighboring house, "I ignored them, but then I was hit by that car... I swear they hit me on purpose... because I would not have anything to do with them."

As in Alice's account, Judy's racist action followed, almost unbidden, from racial awakening: "Of course, after I got hit by a car, that was it... I started getting into politics." An African American driver was the only possibility that seemed to make sense of this otherwise random tragedy, to accord it intent and purpose. In addition, such a racial lens made sense of her other hardships of her financial marginality and limited opportunities. Such racialized understanding, however, did not come incrementally or as the result of Judy's economic frustrations alone. Rather, Judy relates the process of becoming a racist as a sudden, metamorphic
process. The world was now revealed as purposeful, conspiratorial, and rent by deep racial fissures. Such understanding then furnished Judy with a sense of purpose. From that point, she relates, her life’s mission was one of devotion to furthering white, Aryan supremacy and African American subordination.

Jan, a 55-year-old Nazi from a small midwestern city related a similar story, describing her complicated medical history in increasingly conspiratorial tones, as a prototype of the struggle between Aryan and Jew. Consider Jan’s memory of the operating room when she was being prepared for surgery:

There was nobody in there. No instruments, nothing. Then a man appeared from behind me and said he’s my anesthesiologist. We started talking. I sat on that operating table, that iron metal thing, and he said, “Where are you from?” I said, “I’m from Germany. I had long blond hair and my face was clear, wonderful complexion. At that time still I believed and trusted completely. . . . He said, “Well, I’m gonna give you the anesthesia now.” I inhaled and realized that I couldn’t exhale . . . he was just sitting there watching me . . . . I wanted to say, I can’t breathe, [but] I had no more voice.14

In this account, Jan’s German (Aryan) naïveté is counterposed against a disembodied but menacing presence who can literally take away her voice and her breath. Much later in the story, Jan gives the explanation for this encounter, simultaneously providing causality and plot to the narrative of her life story. She relates her discovery that the anesthesiologist was Jewish, that, in fact, the hospital—along with the media, the government, nearly everything—was owned and controlled by Jews. Jews are both sinister and invisible, Jan concludes. That is the key to their awesome power to control the fate of unsuspecting Aryans.

If such stories reveal one common way that activists mold themselves to the ideologies of racist groups, it is also clear that they are not reliable accounts of actual political recruitment or ideological conversion. On the contrary, virtually all informants, when pressed to construct chronological life histories, reveal a pattern of recruitment to racial-based politics quite at odds with the pattern of conversion-by-striking event described in more abstract accounts. The Cleveland activist’s accident, for example, was not simply the blinding moment of awareness that she recounts in her life history but also one that brought her into contact with a locally prominent neo-Nazi who offered to take her in during her convalescence. Similarly, it was in the process of investigating a medical malpractice claim that the middle-aged Nazi activist became acquainted with a local white power activist who monitored local hospitals and doctors.

Thus, these conversion stories are best understood as learned narratives, retrospectively formatted by the political, ideological, and even stylistic conventions of racist group imagery. They have the monocausal structure of racist ideology in which the world is sharply divided between friend and foe and historical agency is assigned to specific groups, usually Jews or African Americans. Racial activists thus learn to align themselves with racial goals, in part, by transforming their understandings of self. As a Southern Klan woman put it:
It is not so much that I am in the Klan, it is the fact that the Klan is in me. By the Klan being in me I have no choice other than to remain, I can’t walk away from myself.

Conversion narratives are formatted in particular, gendered ways. Although the life experiences of these racist activists differed considerably, the memories to which they return, or which they construct, as the fulcrum of racial conversion are amazingly similar. It is bodily experience that forms a core to conversion. Negatively, it is assaults on one’s body—in the form of invasion, attack, or trauma—that are presented as the causes of ideological conversion. Positively, it is the absorption of racial commitment into one’s bodily self (“I am in the Klan [and] the Klan is in me”) that marks successful conversion and racial commitment.

Learning to become a racist—conversion—is an endless process. Within racist organizations, recruits continue to learn new, more complicated understandings of the racial order. This is most clear in the life history accounts of experiences with Jews and African Americans. Virtually all of the respondents could point to incidents in their past that they perceived as negative with African Americans or other people of color, even if the negative evaluation was only retrospectively applied. Nevertheless, none of the respondents recounted any past experience—positive or negative—with anyone who was Jewish. Anti-Semitism—more than anti-African American racism—seems to be learned within racist groups. Women join racist groups because of an antipathy toward African Americans or other racial minorities. Once they become associated with the racist movement, however, they are taught that it is Jews who manipulate racial tension. As a midwestern Nazi put it, “When I first joined [her group], it was for dislike of Blacks. Now I realize the Jews are controlling their puppets, the Blacks, for their own means.”

Selective Adoption

A second way that women create coherent narratives of their involvement in the racist movement is by transforming their sense of the goals of organized racism. Just as through “conversion” women adjust themselves to conform more closely to the goals of the racial movement, women racist activists also transform their understandings of racial activism by selectively disregarding aspects of the ideologies or agendas of racial groups that are at variance with their personal goals or allegiances. For these women, “collective identity”—what Gans refers to as the process of defining “being part of a ‘we’ who can do something” (1992, 84)—is highly fragmentary, based on the selective adoption of group agendas and identities. This discrepancy between personal and group understandings and identities explains why the organizational texts and public propaganda of racist groups often differ in significant ways from individual members’ attitudes and political motivations and even from members’ perceptions of the group’s goals and agendas.

Life history narratives indicate that many women members undergo a fairly convoluted and incomplete process of political and rhetorical socialization into organized racism. This is reflected in the shallow explanations that activists provide
for their participation, such as a middle-aged midwestern Klanswoman who said she joined the Klan because ‘you can meet celebrities . . . you know, [referring to talk show Klansmen] people you see on television.’ But it is obvious also in the pains that informants take to point out their disagreements with the racist movement overall or even with their particular group. Several Klanswomen confided their support for legal abortion and their disagreement with the Klan’s negative stand on homosexuality. A young neo-Nazi leader on the West Coast disclosed that her best friend was married to an African American and that their children play together. And an Aryan supremacist in New England told of her involvement in a lesbian-dominated goddess-worship group, dismissing the suggestion that this runs counter to the antihomosexual politics of her group by saying, ‘Oh, we’re just great friends . . . none of us really believe in the label thing.’ Almost one-third (11) of the informants volunteered information on mixed-race or homosexual family members with whom they were on friendly terms.

Even the attitudes of very committed racists do not always mirror the groups to which they are dedicated. Nearly all informants (29), including those in leadership positions, dissented from at least part of the organizational doctrine, typically based on personal experiences such as having family members or work colleagues of another race, religion, nationality, or sexual orientation. Several Klanswomen complained that their Klan chapters were too male oriented, too sexist. Others complained that movement men only want women to have white babies; one countered that she tells young women recruits to “get an education and be somebody first.” Women in groups with rigidly male-dominant ideologies, as expected, were more likely to dispute their organizational positions than were women in groups with more gender-inclusive philosophies.

A variant of this tendency toward selective adoption is the belief that race, religion, and ethnicity can only be known through actions. People who are ‘on your side’ therefore are necessarily white, Aryan, or Christian—regardless of their appearance. Conversely, those who wrong you must be nonwhite, non-Aryan, or Jewish. Such a logic is evident in a number of interviews where respondents sought to distinguish someone’s true racial identity from their superficial racial markings. When a Southern neo-Nazi described her best friend, an African American man, for instance, she explained that, as a confidante, he was “really white.” Having an interracial friendship thus did not disturb her racist beliefs because she assigned race on the basis of loyalty, not skin color.

Adherence to organized racism, therefore, does not presuppose complete ideological transformation. Rather, at least some recruits selectively disregard, transform, or choose to violate the very principles that appear central to the mission and agenda of racist groups. And such ideological distancing is intensely gendered. It allows these respondents to participate in racist groups whose goals and agendas—largely forged by the beliefs of male racist leaders—are not fully consonant with the lives and relationships of women recruits. As women enter racial politics, they adopt the ideas that least threaten their own lives and personal commitments; the rest are simply ignored.
Surprisingly, such apparent inconsistencies rarely seem to threaten either the ideological coherence of the group or members' allegiance to the group's overall agendas. At least in part, this is due to the relatively fluid and disorganized nature of many contemporary racist groups in which dissent from organizational doctrine is widespread and fairly accepted among subgroups of members, like these women activists. Indeed, ideological flexibility may be key to the ability of racist groups at this stage of development to recruit from among mainstream white populations.

Resignation

A third narrative strategy is resignation. Stories of men's political commitment—on the Left or Right—typically convey a tone of excitement, of self-satisfaction. Ezekiel comments on such a sense of personal fulfillment through racist political action: "Organizing is the leader's jones. He has to have it. Like every jones, it is his world, his lover, his identity. Without it he is nothing; when engaged, he is God" (1995, 64).

This sense of satisfaction and lack of reservation, widely reported among male racist leaders (Billig 1978; Hasselbach 1996; also Luchterhand and Wieland 1981) and evident in the self-aggrandizing autobiographies that pepper the literature of contemporary racist groups, is not found among women racist activists. Racial "enlightenment" is presented, at best, in terms of passive resignation, more often in despair—as a burden, an onerous responsibility, an unwanted obligation. There is little bluster, almost no swagger, among these women when they are discussing their racial mission. In contrast to Billig's (1978) interview with a male member of the British National Front who was anxious to impart the party line to others, these racist women were much more reluctant to see political knowledge as preferable to ignorance. As one Nazi member put it, "It's painful, it hurts, it's all consuming when you have the knowledge." Another commented, "If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't want to know anything." A member of an Aryan supremacist group stated, "It's hard feeling this duty to alert other people."

Although almost one-half (16) of the respondents said that they had tried to recruit others into the movement, almost everyone was hesitant, or even negative, about the possibility of enlisting immediate family members, especially their own children or prospective children. As one Nazi survivalist stated, "I won't teach my children to be political... I don't want them to have that burden." A Klanswoman said that she "wouldn't encourage anyone to join, it's just something I did."

Many respondents took pains to deny their own racial activism. Even highly visible racial leaders claimed that they were not activists, that they tried not to be "too active," or that they were active only when it was "necessary for survival." As one prominent Aryan supremacist commented when discussing her own affiliation with a violent racist group, "I was in kind of an unaware state [when I joined]."

Even when activists described acts of personal political agency—searching out what they invariably called "the truth" in literature or through movement contacts—their descriptions of these activities were passive, even despondent. Political
histories, especially from those involved with gender-traditional groups like the Klan or Christian Identity sects, were related primarily in terms of victimization.

These women racists also present themselves as victims of public perception, unjustly characterized negatively by the world at large. A white separatist complained that she needed to hide her real feelings about African Americans and Jews for fear of losing her job. A Nazi protested that she didn’t "like the way people view me as a hater." An Aryan supremacist said, "People look at us as though we are sick, as though we are the problem of society." To counter this, informants routinely distance themselves from what they claim are more extreme elements of the movement, claiming, as a Klanswoman did, that their group "is no different than being in the Girl Scouts" but that, conversely, "most of the [other] people in the movement have too much hate." Similarly, a skinhead related a story of another woman racist leader who "used to tell me people that had brown hair and brown eyes [like me] were just filth and trash and wasn’t worthy of being around. She really scared me." More commonly, women object to the restrictions placed on their racial activities by movement men or complain about the disparaging remarks about women that pervade much racist literature and the conversation of male racist leaders.

It is not a sense of ideological passion or the desire to spread racist ideas and thereby change the world that characterizes the ways in which women understand their role in organized racism. Rather, a sense of hopelessness pervades both descriptions of the "degenerate" society that surrounds them and the possibilities for changing that situation. For them, racism is a politic of despair. Male racial activists talk of becoming empowered by racial knowledge and racial activism, boasting of their connections to violence and their abilities to change undesired situations (e.g., Billig 1978, 226-27). For women, the talk is very different. Activism is seen solely as a recourse for protecting their children or themselves from a troubled society that they have come to understand in racialized terms, but a means that stands little chance of success. As a white supremacist said, "I would like my future to be a little house on the prairie picture . . . but it will not be like that. I think we’ll be struggling my whole life . . . surrounded by immorality and corruption." Activism thereby is a defensive stance. It does not deliver a sense of self-satisfaction and power. For these women, the racist movement promises the possibility for fending off the social forces that they see as threatening to engulf them and their families, but it promises, and delivers, little to them personally.

The emotional resignation found among these women activists reflects a final form of "sense making." To the extent that racist politics does not deliver obvious and tangible rewards for women activists, they construct their participation in the movement as involuntary, automatic, and unconscious. Consider the passive nature of the political narrative related by a 19-year-old Rocky Mountain state racist skinhead:

Q: Do you remember the first thing that brought you in [to the white supremacist movement]?
A: Uh, well, they used to have like Bible Studies here, the white supremacists here... I went to them even though I'm not necessarily all for the Bible, but I went there and started getting involved with them, and they would have like demonstrations and marches and stuff around here. So I started going with them to offer support and then... well, a friend of mine went to one of their meetings one time and she told me about it and then I went to it the next week, and then I started getting involved in it and stuff.²⁷

Little in this narrative suggests the sense of confidence, self-direction, or personal agency that is often assumed to be a compensation for participation in social movements (Gamson 1992, 186). Rather, this informant presents racial involvement as something that just happened to her, the end result of a series of minor actions chosen without a particular political objective.

Making sense of racial politics by denying personal agency is a common response of those involved in political causes that are widely condemned and serves to normalize the consequences of involvement. Rosenthal (1991, 39) found such assertions in a study of Germans who witnessed World War II but did not face persecution. The narratives of women racist activists, however, express more than just self-justifications. Instead, the declarations of resignation convey both hopelessness in the face of outside social or political forces and powerlessness to reconcile the contradiction between what they see as lofty movement goals of white, Aryan supremacy and the actual experiences of white, Aryan women within the racist movement. All activists concur that the movement’s abstract goals of racial purity are laudatory, but many also indicate that the process of working toward these goals provides them little gratification. It is in this sense that the resignation of women racial activists—their expressions of self-denigration, emotional pain, victimization, and lack of awareness—represents a gendered response to experiences within male-defined racist politics.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The inclusion of women into an analysis of racist movements, and the explication of how women reconcile their perceived interests with those of the racist movement, suggests several implications about the process whereby people become members of organized hate groups. First, the divergent understandings and incorporations of movement goals by members highlight the multidimensionality of political positions within organized racism. Even within the most extreme racist groups, there is no simple relationship between gender, or sexual orientation or abortion politics, and the ideologies of race, nation, morality, or family that we typically bundle together as “right wing” or “reactionary” (Yohn 1994). Not all members favor gender inequality, oppose abortion, or favor the death penalty for homosexuality. Indeed, the organizing momentum of the racist movement in recent years, and its ability to attract substantial numbers of women recruits, may reflect...
its ability to accommodate some measure of ideological dissension within its ranks even while maintaining a facade of political unity.

Second, this analysis indicates that women's involvement in organized racism is more rational, and less capricious, than earlier research suggests. Women's entrance into organized racism is not a simple matter of their obliviousness to the political agenda of racist groups nor of personal gullibility on the part of individual recruits. Rather, women work to create a rational connection between themselves and the goals of racist politics.

This reconceptualization also has implications for political organizing. If the conditions of women's participation in organized racism indeed are social and rational, rather than psychological and irrational, then it should be possible to design political measures to counter the recruitment of women by racist groups, even to recruit women away from racial politics. Further, if the narratives through which women construct an understanding of the intersection of their personal biographies and the politics of racist organizing are themselves gendered, it is the case that antiracist organizing also needs to be gendered. We cannot counter the appeal of racist groups to some women, or lure women from these groups, by assuming that racial activism is gender neutral. Rather, it is clear that women's understandings of their racial activism rest on a foundation of fear of bodily threat, a valuation of personal relationships, and a sense of personal passivity that may differ significantly from the self-evaluations of male racists, and these need to be addressed in effective antiracist politics.

Given the paucity of research on women in racist groups, it is premature to posit specific strategies, but some general guidelines can be inferred from the findings of this research. Most important, if personal allegiances are as important as ideological commitments to many women racist activists, then relationships whose nature is at variance with racist goals (e.g., interracial friendships) are a possible route for "conversion" out of racist politics. Moreover, to the extent that women experience their participation in racist politics through a lens of resignation and despair, alternative political agendas that empower, rather than restrict, women members may be attractive. Finally, given the critical role of personal recruitment into racist politics, tactics that seek to disrupt or prevent contacts between racial activists and potential recruits are critical. At present, the racist movement is enjoying considerable success in recruiting women. However, well-designed strategic efforts by antiracist activists can play a considerable role in reversing this trend.

NOTES

1. Although many of the new racist groups are small—often consisting of little more than a handful of members with a post office box—some command substantial numbers of members. (See periodic
reports from the Center for Democratic Renewal, P.O. Box 50469, Atlanta, GA 30302 and the Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36104.)

2. These estimates are based on private discussions between the author and several national and regional Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi leaders. Secret and transient memberships of these groups make it impossible to verify these figures, but they generally coincide with information provided by state police officials and national anti-racist, anti-Semitic monitoring groups such as the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

3. Interview conducted by the author, May 20, 1995. All informants were promised anonymity, so names and locations of interviews are not included in citations.

4. This characterization is based on content analysis of the literature of more than 100 white supremacist, anti-Semitic and Aryan separatist/supremacist groups in the United States collected by the author.

5. Although not guided by feminist theory, Jeansonne's (1996) study of women's participation in the pro-fascist U.S. "mother's movement" during World War II also points to both status and psychological (scapegoating) factors.

6. Lists of contemporary racist groups exist in the Wilcox Collection at the University of Kansas, but the ephemeral nature of many groups and their constant relocation to evade authorities makes any list outdated almost as soon as it is published.

7. Because racist groups change their names and memberships very quickly, it is impossible to tell exactly how many distinct groups are represented in this list.

8. Such problems have prompted many researchers to focus primarily on the literature produced by hate groups, but this provides little reliable information on what motivates people to join hate groups, or how members are recruited.

9. This is similar to Taylor's (1989) conception of "alleviance systems" in social movements, although the focus here is on individual participation rather than movement continuity.

10. Family ties were a common route into racial activism, but by no means were all racial activists raised in white supremacist households. More than one-third of my informants identify their parents' ideological leanings as progressive or leftist.

11. This, and all names, are pseudonyms.


13. Interview conducted by the author, December 5, 1994.


15. Interview conducted by the author, September 3, 1994.


17. Interviews conducted by the author, February 10 and 11, May 30, February 17, April 20 and June 28, 1995. Such sentiments should not be confused with the fraudulent expressions of affinity for victims that are frequently found in retrospectives of war or violent activity (e.g., Luchterhand and Wieland 1981, 281).

18. Interview conducted by the author, February 17, 1995.


20. By contrast, dissent within the tightly organized Nazi party after the mid-1930s was possible only among intimate groups, if at all (Peukert 1982, 77).


22. Interviews conducted by the author, June 18 and January 15, 1995.

23. Interviews conducted by the author, June 1 and April 17, 1995.

24. Interviews conducted by the author, January 15, June 20, and June 1, 1995.

25. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, several studies examine the contradictions between the desire for female participation in racist/fascist movements and the idealization of apolitical maternal women in the ideologies of these movements (see Blee 1991; Koonz 1984).


27. Interview conducted by the author April 2, 1995.
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