

"Does Gender Matter in the United States Far-Right?"¹

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Less than twenty years ago, a prominent historian remarked on the lack of scholarly attention to the U.S. Right. He attributed the situation to a “problem of historical imagination” stemming from an assumption that progressive, secular modernism undergirded U.S. political life.² Reactionary, right-wing, and religious-based conservative politics were not only marginalized by scholars; they were inexplicable within dominant paradigms of inquiry. The problem of historical imagination that he described was even more severe for women’s participation in the U.S. right. Assumptions about rightist politics made the women who participated in such efforts doubly marginal, as rightists and as women. They were simply invisible to scholars, a situation that Sonya O. Rose argues was widespread in the historical imagination,

Women had been neglected as historical subjects because historians viewed history to be almost singularly about the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics, arenas in which the actors were men.³

In the intervening decades, much has changed. There is now a substantial scholarship on the right in the U.S., as well as a number of studies of women’s role and gender issues in rightist

² Alan Brinkley, ‘The Problem of American Conservatism’, *American Historical Review*, 99:2 (1994), pp. 409-429. Brinkley’s assessment of the paucity of such scholarship was disputed by Leo P. Ribuffo in ‘Why is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?’, *American Historical Review*, 99:2 (1994), pp. 438-449.

³ Sonya O. Rose, *What is Gender History?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), p.4.

movements of many sorts.⁴ Yet, despite this accumulation of research, we are far from understanding *how* and *to what extent* gender matters in the U.S. right. This article seeks to explain why it is difficult to understand how gender matters in the right, and suggest an analytic agenda for scholars who seek to do so.

⁴ There are excellent recent studies of women's involvement in a variety of rightist movements in U.S., including the anti-women's suffrage movement, antiradicalism during the 1920s Red Scare, efforts to stop U.S. entry into World War II, the anti-New Deal movement, and the New Right and New Christian Right of the 1970s to the present. These include June M. Benowitz, *Days of Discontent: American Women and Right-Wing Politics, 1933-1945* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Susan E. Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001); Ronnee Schreiber, *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). A recent review of sociological research on the right in the U.S. is Kathleen M. Blee and Kimberly A. Creasap, 'Conservative and Right-Wing Movements', *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010), pp. 269-286.

The premise of this article is that a series of conceptual templates have circumscribed scholarship on gender and women in the U. S. right and continue to do so today.⁵ Not all these templates are explicitly about women or gender, but each has shaped how women and gender issues are studied within the U.S. right. Similar to how Harriet Zuckerman describes the research process in science, in which “scientists define some problems as pertinent, and others as uninteresting or even illegitimate, primarily on the basis of theoretical commitments and other assumption structures,” scholars of the right are steered toward some questions and not others by these conceptual templates.⁶

I begin by presenting two templates that earlier made it difficult for scholars to see women as significant rightist actors or gender issues as central in the U.S. right. These are the template of the rightist as male and the template of Nazi Germany as the prototype of far-right. I then consider three templates that underlie current studies of rightist politics in the U.S. These are the template of historical continuity, the template of belief-driven activism, and the template

⁵ Wanda J. Orlikowski, ‘Material Knowing: The Scaffolding of Human Knowledgeability’, (Unpublished paper, downloaded October 19, 2010, http://seeit.mit.edu/Publications/Orlikowski_OKLC_write-up_2006.pdf). Excellent discussions of how conceptual templates shape the questions that scholars ask are found in Judith Lorber, ‘Shifting Paradigms and Challenging Categories’, *Social Problems* 53:4 (2006), pp. 448-453 and Joan W. Scott, ‘AHR Forum: Unanswered Questions’, *American Historical Review* 113:5 (2008), pp. 1422-1429.

⁶ Harriet Zuckerman, ‘Theory Choice and Problem Choice in Science’, *Sociological Inquiry* 48:3/4 (1978), p. 74.

of gender as a category of analysis. These latter templates have not precluded the study of women and gender on the right, but they have led to problems of focus and interpretation. To illustrate the limitations imposed by these templates, I draw examples from my studies of two major U.S. movements of the right, the 1920s Ku Klux Klan and modern organized racism. These racist movements were widely separated in time but both enlisted a gender-diverse membership and sought similar goals of white supremacy. Each targeted Jews and African Americans, yet they differed in other aspects of their ideology and political strategy. The U.S. did not have substantial fascist movements like those in Europe, Latin American, and Asia, so racist movements are its most prominent manifestation of extreme-right politics.⁷

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) of the 1920s was a massive racist movement. Unlike the first KKK of the Reconstruction-era rural South or subsequent Klans from the 1950s and after, the 1920s KKK took deep root in the states of the U.S. North and in urban areas. This second Klan attracted an estimated 3-5 million recruits, who constituted a staggering proportion of the white, native-born, Protestant population that was eligible for membership. Even those who didn't officially join the Klan often supported its efforts, cheering its vast parades down the main streets of cities and towns and electing its candidates to state and local office. Klan chapters across the country had some autonomy to define their enemies and strategies. Although all 1920s Klans saw African Americans, Jews, and Catholics as their enemies, local Klans also targeted regionally-specific enemies, including labor radicals and Mormons. Perhaps most striking, the

⁷ Martin Durham, *The Christian Right: The Far Right and the Boundaries of American Conservatism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

second Klan differentiated itself from the earlier and later Klans by actively recruiting women. These efforts were so successful that by the mid-1920s, women accounted for at least a half-million of the Klan's members. Klanswomen were organized into a variety of Women's Klans with their own hierarchies, rituals, and goals. Some cooperated with the male KKK but others were very distinct and even hostile to chapters of the men's Klan.⁸

My study of the 1920s Klan was primarily archival, focused on reconstructing the history of the national Women's Klan organizations as well as the experience of local Klanswomen and Klanswomen's chapters in Indiana, a state with large, influential, and active Women's and Men's Klans. In addition, I conducted a number of interviews with former Klanswomen in Indiana. Although quite elderly by the time they were interviewed, these women were able to provide important recollections about their experience in the Klan that are not available in the documents that survive. Almost all, for example, recounted their time in the Klan in positive terms and were anxious to convince me that being in the Klan was not a particularly extraordinary period in their lives.

Modern organized racism consists of a variety of overlapping and often antagonistic groups of neo-Nazis, white power skinheads, Ku Klux Klans, and assorted white supremacists. Some are highly organized groups; others are little more than loosely networked and tiny racist cells or 'lone wolf' practitioners of racial violence. Since the 1980s, most racist groups have avidly recruited women, resulting in a substantial cadre of women who are deeply committed to

⁸ Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA:

University of California Press, 1991) and Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Politics and National Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

the principles of Aryan and white supremacy. Many members of organized racism today also embrace a virulent form of anti-Semitism, regarding Jews as the literal descendants of Satan who need to be annihilated. Modern racists simultaneously fear and desire to advance an apocalyptic race war and many support tactics and ideologies of violence and terrorism to further the politics of pan-Aryan supremacy.⁹

My study of modern organized racism focused on the recent incorporation of large proportions of women into racist groups, an effort that partly reflects the desire of male racist leaders to have members who they view as less likely to attract police attention. I conducted extensive life history interviews with a sample of women racist activists who were chosen to represent a variety of types of groups, ages, position in the group, and region of the country. In these interviews, I questioned racist women about the process whereby they learned about organized racism and decided to join, as well as their experiences in the racist movement. I also conducted supplementary interviews with several female and male racist activists to address questions that emerged after the conclusion of the original study. These include the effects of increased federal surveillance of the racist movement and the shift toward a structure of small racist cells on women's participation and experience in organized racism.

Earlier Templates

⁹ Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Martin Durham, *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2007); and Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

The Rightist as Male

When studies of women on the political right began to emerge in the mid-1970s as part of a burgeoning feminist scholarship,¹⁰ they often were heralded as scholarly discoveries that unearthed new facts about women's involvement in the far right. But, for the most part these early feminist scholars did not 'discover' that women had participated in rightist politics in Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, the U.S. New Right, and elsewhere. The 'fact' of women's involvement was not found in a hitherto-unexplored archival collection or through a previously inaccessible racist group. Rather, such facts lay in plain sight, invisible only because they weren't 'seen' as meaningful and significant through templates of scholarly inquiry that marked right-wing politics as the exclusive province of men. Only through a feminist conceptual lens, in which women were central subjects of inquiry, were rightist women made visible.

The 1920s KKK is a case in point. Women's involvement in this Klan had been mentioned in many earlier histories of the Klan. Yet, these works treated Klanswomen as simply auxiliary participants, not political actors in their own right. Since women were not considered

¹⁰ Early studies include Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975); Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988); and Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

worthy of substantial scholarly inquiry, the questions that guided scholarship on the participants in the 1920s Klan were almost exclusively framed in terms of men: Did they hold lower or middle class occupations? Did they view the Klan as similar to other male fraternities? How did Klansmen practice violence against those they saw as their enemies?

Not only the participation of women, but also the existence of women-only Klan groups that contended for power and money with their male counterparts had earlier been documented by historians. But the template that real Klan activists were male made it difficult to ask questions about how women organized racial and religious bigotry in these women's Klans. It undercut the possibility of knowing whether Klanswomen created a politics of hatred in ways differently than did Klansmen.

Nazi Germany as the Prototype of Rightist Politics

Early studies of racist women in the U.S. took place against a second conceptual template, that the prototypical form of organized racism was WWII-era German Nazism. Although not specifically about gender, this template also shaped how women and gender were approached in scholarship on the U.S. right. Three implications of the Nazi Germany template were influential in this regard. First, that right-wing extremism grows in an explosive and exponential fashion, as did the Nazi movement in prewar Germany. Second, that far right movements are the product of macro-level and structural crises, especially economic strain or national defeat. Third, that the extreme right gains ascendancy when its authoritarian goals fit the psycho-social structure of the population, as it did in pre-war Germany's rigid and hierarchical family, parenting, and personality styles.

The template of the German Nazi experience as prototypical undercut scholarship on women and gender in the U.S. right because it measured the significance of rightist politics by size. As numerical minorities in racist movements like the 1920s Klan, women were assumed to matter proportionately less; in fact, not at all. Moreover, the propositions that right-wing extremism results from psycho-social factors such as authoritarianism and structural crises like economic collapse or national defeat seemed to underscore its masculinist character: the far-right attracts men who are worried about their eroding power in the family or in the economy and polity. But, these factors made the participation of women on the far right incomprehensible. White men – who were privileged in economic life, public politics, and the family – had a clear interest in racist appeals to traditionalism, economic stability, and national resurgence. That these men’s anger and fear would lead them into the right was understandable, if unfortunate. It was rational and self-interested. Why so many women found right-wing politics appealing in some eras, however, could not be explained. Gender wasn’t peripheral to the right in this explanation; indeed, it was paramount. Rightist mobilization was explained by gender, although implicitly. That gender was assumed by the template meant that it did not need to be investigated.

Challenges to Earlier Templates

Over the past two decades, the work of feminist scholars disrupted the earlier templates of studying the Right. The template of the rightist as male could not be sustained as scholars documented women’s participation in a variety of fascist, racist, and rightist political efforts around the globe. Certainly, in the U.S. the existence of half a million women in the 1920s Klan made clear that political projects like those of white supremacy had not been solely the province

of men. Moreover, the Klanswomen of the 1920s were political actors with backgrounds, motivations, and actions that did not match those of Klansmen. For instance, a number of prominent leaders of the Women's Klan came into the Klan after working to promote women's right to vote. Part of a rightist effort to enlist white women in the electorate to counteract the suffrage earlier granted to African American men, they brought to their Klan the political skills and networks they had honed in suffrage activism. This experience allowed them to fashion tactics uniquely tailored for women, tactics that were at least as effective and destructive as the traditional night-riding violence of the men's Klan. An example was the networks of sympathetic women developed by Klanswomen to systematically circulate rumors about their enemies. These "poison squads of whispering women" spread tales of spoiled meat that destroyed the livelihoods of Jewish merchants; rumors of sexual attack that drove African American men from their homes and communities; and stories of Papal conspiracies used as evidence to force Catholic teachers from public school jobs.

Focusing on women also reshaped analytic categories used to understand broader aspects of far-right politics, what Alice Kessler-Harris described as the way that uncovering the history of women can "enrich the study of history *tout court*."¹¹ Paying attention to women in the 1920s Klan, for instance, meant rethinking the idea of collective racial violence. The racial terror practiced by Klanswomen was not public and physical, like that of Klansmen. Instead, it took the form of private rumor mills that could destroy lives and livelihoods. Exploring the propaganda published by the 1920s Women's Klan also undermined simple ideas about political ideologies as either leftist or rightist, as these Women's Klans embraced rights for (native, white,

¹¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Do We Still Need Women's History?' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 December, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i15/15b00601.htm>.

and Protestant) women such as the suffrage and an 8 hour work day for mothers within their agenda of racial and religious supremacy. Taking the Women's Klan seriously demonstrated that important aspects of organized racism had been invisible when only men were taken into account; in other words, that organized racism is gendered.

The template of German Nazism, too, began to collapse with additional studies of rightist movements in the U.S., including those focused on women. Organized racist movements, for instance, did not correlate very well with the nation's periodic economic crises. The second Klan, the largest wave of organized racism in the twentieth century, grew during the relative prosperity of the 1920s and collapsed on the eve of the Great Depression. Moreover, its strength was not only in places characterized by economic, political and social competition and conflict, like the tumultuous urban areas where native born whites sought to maintain their stake in jobs and housing in the face of vast numbers of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europeans and African Americans arriving from the rural South or the racially contentious areas of the deep South. Instead, the second Klan flourished as well in the fairly homogeneous small towns and rural areas of the Midwest, Northeast, and West.

Studies of rightist women in the U.S. also challenged the focus on social dislocation and personal frustration as explanations of rightist politics. They showed instead that the far-right could find a base within the fabric of mundane everyday experience in stable and even prosperous communities. Looking carefully at the Women's Klan of the 1920s, for example, revealed how both it and the Men's Klans established themselves in the framework of ordinary, taken-for-granted life of heavily white, native-born Protestant places. Focusing on women's participation in this Klan revealed the political consequences of the myriad of Klannish rituals and events in which women were a profound force, from Klan weddings, funerals, and baby

christenings to pie-eating contests, community fairs, junior girls' Klans, and Klannish father-son sporting events. Far more than incidental cultural activities, these activities and rituals were a means by which the Klan could insert its racist agenda directly into the daily life of communities. These allowed white native born Protestants to embrace the Klan as just another facet of expected life in their racially and religiously uniform social world; they did not need the assaults of social dislocation or economic frustration to find the Klan's message compelling. Such findings helped shift the search for the foundations of racist mobilization away from the extraordinary forces of social and personal upheaval and toward the ordinary practices of daily life.

Current Templates

By the turn of the twenty-first century, three new templates of inquiry emerged within scholarship on the U.S. right. These accommodated study of rightist women's participation more easily than did earlier templates, but they also introduced new assumptions that continue to curtail a full understanding of how gender matters in the U.S. political right.

Template of historical continuity

The template of historical continuity emerged as a consequence of a shift toward understanding right-wing extremism as a social and political movement rather than an expression of collective anxieties and anger. It developed as part of a general shift away from theorizing all social and political movements as irrational outbursts of collective action and toward understanding them as strategic, organized, and rational collective responses to perceived problems in society. Scholars continued to emphasize the role of personality factors like

authoritarianism, rage, and resentment in shaping movements of the right long after these issues ceased to be on the agenda in the study of progressive movements. Yet, by the mid-1990s, most scholarly work on the U.S. right treated it as a social movement that employed rational strategies and tactics to mobilize members, develop its goals and ideologies, and change society.¹²

The shift toward considering the right as a political movement proved quite productive for scholars. In the case of modern organized racism, it made it possible to understand why so many racist women activists today tend to be well educated and from stable, middle-class families – a far cry from the frustrated, dislocated, or marginal members that earlier templates would predict. Looking at organized racism as a racist movement opened questions of what strategies racist groups use to cultivate women members and revealed that racist recruiters are dispatched to approach women in the ordinary settings of middle-class life – striking up conversations on the playground, at meetings of environmental groups, in grocery stores, and in birthing preparation classes. Women join racist groups, not because they initially are filled with hate and fury toward racial others, but because they come to know and trust someone who they meet in the ordinary course of their lives. Through these contacts, they slowly learn a set of racial beliefs and are eased into the world of organized racism.

However, the move toward thinking of the right as a social movement created an analytic template that proved problematic in the study of gender and women. Seeing the right as a social movement suggested that it was more coherent and continuous than it might be. It made rightist

¹² For example, see Chip Berlet and Matthew Nemiroff Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000).

movements appear to be political entities whose variations across time and context were simply instances of an underlying case, obscuring important distinctions within the right.

The history of the Ku Klux Klan, what Martin Durham terms “America’s distinctive contribution to right-wing extremism,”¹³ suggests the problem with assuming that rightist social movements necessarily have analytic integrity. The KKK had four periods of activity, although these were historically discontinuous and had few, if any, overlapping members or organizations. In addition to the post-Civil War first Klan and the Klan of the 1920s, a Klan emerged to oppose racial desegregation in the 1960s and early 1970s and again, in the form of a myriad of competing Klan units, as part of a rise in organized racist activism in the 1980s. At each appearance, the various chapters and groups that claimed the Klan name employed a similar set of rituals and dressed their members in comparable regalia, generally white robes and hoods. Each Klan also promoted an agenda of white supremacy and, usually, supported violent means to achieve its goals.

Although it is tempting to see these Klans as historical eruptions of an underlying Klan movement, there are such significant differences in the Klan across time periods that it is difficult to term this a single movement. Women were members of the 1920s and are members in most of the current Klans, but women were excluded from the first Klan and largely absent in the third. Moreover, gender issues do not correspond with women’s Klan participation. Gender was a central ideological issue for the Reconstruction, which portrayed white Southern women as under threat from vengeful freed slave men and victorious Union soldiers. It served a similar purpose in the 1920s Men’s Klan which routinely depicted white women as the sexual prey of savage African American men, lustful Catholic priests, and exploitative Jewish businessmen.

¹³ Durham, *The Christian Right*, p. 4.

But gender issues were much more rarely evoked in the nearly all-male 1960s Klan and among male leaders in today's Klans there is considerable division and conflict over whether white women are racial victims or equal racist warriors.¹⁴

The varying approaches of each wave of the Klan to issues of gender and the participation of women is true of other issues as well. African Americans were the primary target of the Reconstruction-era and third Klans, but Jews and Catholics were central enemy groups in the 1920s. Today, most Klans target Jews and all people of color. The 1920s Klan was highly nationalistic, terming itself as a 100% American movement. In the first Klan, however, the scars of the Civil War meant that appeals to nationalism were fraught. The same was true of the 1960s Klan which supported an agenda of states' rights against federal government power in the wake of federal support for racial desegregation. And nationalism is increasingly marginal in today's Klans due to the increasing appeal of the agenda of global pan-Aryanism. Put more simply, the ideologies, composition, and focus of the Klan are inconsistent over time in ways that defy easy categorization or analysis. Women aren't becoming more or less central; neither are issues of race or nationalism.

The problem with regarding organized racism as a historically continuous movement is two-fold. One issue is methodological: social phenomena that look the same from afar can look very different up close. From an analytic distance, taking what feminist theorist Dorothy Smith

¹⁴ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*; Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie Shanks-Meile, 'The White Separatist Movement: Worldviews on Gender, Feminism, Nature and Change' in Abby L. Ferber (ed.), *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 113-42; and Martin Durham, *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

disparagingly refers to as a “bird’s eye view” of social life¹⁵, the Klan seems to be a category of racist practice that exists over time – as angry groups of mostly men, garbed in similar outfits, eager to blame their problems on racialized others. From up-close, however, a scrutiny of the actual beliefs and practices of each Klan makes it look so different over time, both ideologically and organizationally, that it is a stretch to think of it as a single social movement.¹⁶

The other issue is representational.¹⁷ What constitutes an instance – a case¹⁸ – of the Klan is not self-evident. Rather, the image of the Klan as a historically (semi)continuous movement of white supremacy is deliberately produced by each Klan itself. At every era when the Klan emerges, its leaders position themselves and their group in an historical trajectory, as the authentic heirs to a longstanding tradition of white resistance to racial integration and

15 Dorothy Smith, ‘From the 14th Floor to the Sidewalk: Writing Sociology at Ground Level’, *Sociological Inquiry* 78: 3 (2008), pp. 417-422.

16 See John R. Hall’s discussion of the problem of concept instability over time and across context, in ‘Cultural Meanings and Cultural Structures in Historical Explanation’, *History and Theory* 39 (October 2000), pp. 331-347.

17 The complications of political representation are discussed in Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, ‘Commemorating a Difficult Past: Yitzhak Rabin’s Memorials’, *American Sociological Review* 67 (Summer, 2002), pp. 30-51.

18 Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker (eds.), *What Is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

equality. That is the significance of Stone Mountain, Georgia, the site where each Klan stages the rituals that denote the Klan's re-birth and are intended to impart a sense of the historical singularity of the Klan. Scholars too often represent the Klan as more coherent than it is by framing it as a continuous political movement, a category of political life. Even in a single era, however, the Klan isn't an entity, despite its efforts to represent itself this way, but rather a collection of similarly-attired but often only vaguely connected and contending groups.

The problem for the study of women and gender on the right is that the template of historical continuity can lead to misleading generalizations about how gender matters without considering specificities of time, place, and context.¹⁹ The effort to indicate how gender and right-wing extremism are related is an example. Asserting a connection between the ideologies or practices of masculine and white supremacy is a highly problematic undertaking if the underlying phenomenon of organized racism is not itself a coherent entity.²⁰

Template of belief-driven activism

Another template is that of belief-driven activism. This is the notion that people come into racist movements because they have racist ideas, or, to put it more abstractly, that racist

¹⁹ See Barbara Risman, 'Gender as a Social Structure: Theory Wrestling with Activism', *Gender & Society* 18:4 (2004), pp. 429-450.

²⁰ For example, see Michael S. Kimmel, 'Globalization and its Mal(e)Contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism,' *International Sociology* 18:3 (2003), pp. 603-620 and Evelyn A. Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970-2000* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006).

beliefs cause racist affiliation and action. But is that always the case? Consider an example of a current racist activist, Sean Gaines.²¹ Sean was described by one observer as “a skinhead's skinhead: 230 pounds of red-laced, jack-booted aggression, recklessness and bravado, notorious for flashing his gun one minute at white power gatherings, and his penis the next.” Raised by a drug-addicted father fond of racial epithets, Sean learned to steal cars and cook methamphetamine at an early age. By 16, he and his father were involved in a vicious torture-murder of a Native American man. Ten years later, now a committed racist skinhead, Sean's spree of violence and mayhem ended with his arrest for capital murder.

At first glance, Sean's biography fits a stereotyped sense of the path into racial extremism: schooled in racist ideas by his father, he turned to violence against racial minorities and became a skinhead. Yet, Sean's story is more complicated. He had an antipathy toward racial minorities, but no particular idea of white supremacy until he hit prison for the first time and met a racist skinhead named Odius. Odius gave Sean the opportunity to earn his first “White Pride” tattoo for attacking a prisoner who owed him money and tried – unsuccessfully – to teach him the tenets of white power. By the time he left prison, Sean still knew little about the ideology behind the white power movement. But he was convinced he was a skinhead and joined other skinheads on “hunting trips” to attack random minorities. It was on these trips,

²¹ This case is taken from Kathleen Blee, “Trajectories of Action and Belief in U.S. Organized Racism” in Assaad E. Azzi, Xenia Chrysochoou, Bert Klandermans, and Bernd Simon (eds), *Identity and Participation in Culturally Diverse Societies: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (London: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 239-255 .

hanging out with skinheads, that Sean finally learned and adopted the ideology of white supremacy that fit his commitment to racist action.²²

Sean's transition from *acting* like a racist to *thinking* like a racist is counter to the usual assumption that people develop an ideology and then act on it. But it is not uncommon. Many racists learn white supremacy by participating in racist actions, not the reverse. In the U.S. today, for example, women racists often learn the virulent ideas of white supremacy as recruiters bring them to racist protests, assaults, and violence. They join in racist activities in the most casual manner, with little reflection on ideas behind the action. Sandy, a skinhead woman I interviewed in 2008, told me that she had always liked to fight, that it made her feel alive and powerful. When she met people in a white power skinhead group, Sandy recalled being instantly attracted to their aggressiveness, the way they talked of smashing their enemies. She joined them in street fights and in violent initiations of new members and soon became a regular. Only after fighting alongside them for some time did she learn and come to embrace their neo-Nazi beliefs.

Sean and Sandy's stories do not match the general assumption that people join racist groups because they hate racial minorities. In their cases, actions came first; only later did they learn and adopt the ideologies that then confirmed their racially extreme actions. They were not

²² Susy Buchanan, 'The Transformation: Facing Trial, Racist Skinhead Claims Change,' *Intelligence Report 129* (Spring 2008), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2008/spring/the-transformation>

in racist groups to express their racist ideas. Rather, being in racist groups transformed their ideas. They were exposed to racist ideologies in the context of racist actions. In modern organized racism, recruits generally enter racist groups with racist beliefs about African Americans, often not all that different than those of other whites. As they become an active part of a racist group, their ideas are reshaped. They learn a new kind of racism, in which Jewish conspirators are said to manipulate whites and people of color for their own benefit and in which the only true whites are those loyal to the white race. That is, racist groups create a form of racism quite different than the ordinary racism with which its followers begin.

By obscuring the possibility that action can shape belief, the template of belief-driven activism misses one way that groups matter in organized racism – shaping the ideas as well as the passion of members. It also can obscure how gender can matter. Since most racist groups are highly structured by gender (even though today's Klans are gender-integrated, their official leaders and spokespersons are virtually all men), racist recruits learn white supremacy within a gendered context. For instance, the slogan of today's white supremacy, known as the "14 words" ("We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children") is taught to women and men very differently. Men learn the slogan as a mandate for individual racial heroism in which the rules of gender are clear: masculinity is demonstrated through racial violence and commitment. Women learn the slogan as a defensive posture, one in which the rules of gender are suspended: women are called to racial actions that are otherwise unimaginable for them for reasons that are extraordinary. Racist activism for women is the upside-down carnival of possibility; for men, it is the culmination of established notions of white manhood.

Template of gender as a category of analysis

The final template is that gender always matters. This is evident in the assumption that the motives that bring women and men into racist activism will necessarily differ. Consider the case of 22-year-old Tristian Lynn Frye who was arrested for her part in a 2003 attack and murder of a homeless man in Tacoma, Washington. The attack was carried out by Tristian and three men, among them her boyfriend, with whose child she was pregnant, and the 19-year-old male reputed leader of the local neo-Nazi Volksfront. The four, all known racist skinheads, had set out to assault a Black drug dealer, but instead attacked a man suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Despite Tristian's statement that she was motivated by a desire to earn a pair of red shoelaces, a Nazi symbol of having taken part in violence against a minority person, and her admission to kicking the homeless man in the head, hard, three or four times, prosecutors considered her to be under the influence of her two male comrades and recommended a reduced sentence.²³

The logic of scholarly inquiry can be not all that different from what happens in the legal system. Women's participation in the right is often firstly attributed to private, affective, and domestic concerns, swamping other possibilities. When women become active racists, in a common explanatory narrative, they extend their private concerns (for children, family) into the

²³ Anti-Defamation League, 'White Supremacists Charged in Brutal Tacoma Murder', 2003, http://www.adl.org/learn/news/tacoma_Murder.asp; Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Two Faces of Volksfront', *Intelligence Report* 114 (Summer 2004), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2004/summer/two-faces-of-volksfront>.

public. They stretch their maternalism or personal loyalties into broader efforts to protect intimate life writ large, on behalf of the white race or the Aryan nation.

The problem is not only that this is a narrow analytic lens on women's racial activism. Nor that it rests on a public/private dichotomy that legions of feminist historians have worked to undermine. The problem is that by assuming that gender (in this case, a gendered division of public and private) is uniformly important, it undercuts our ability to see how gender can be more or less – or differently – salient across social arenas and in relation to other forms of categorization.²⁴

²⁴ Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis", *Gender and History* 20:3 (2008), pp. 558-583 and Nancy Chodorow, 'Seventies Questions for Thirties Women: Gender and Generation in a Study of Early Women Psychoanalysis,' in Nancy Chodorow (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) make this argument. I thank Arlene Stein for bring Chodorow's piece to my attention. A similar point can be made about the ritual evocation of the triad of race-class-gender in feminist scholarship, as detailed in Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, "Race, Class Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 23:3 (2005), pp. 249-265, Ange-Marie Hancock, 'Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm', *Politics & Gender* 32:2 (2007), pp. 24-254, Ange-Marie Hancock, 'When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm', *Perspectives on Politics* 5:1 (2007), pp. 63-79, and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13:3 (2006), pp. 193-209.

Michael Schwartz observed that we can sometimes see social phenomena more clearly if we look at them indirectly.²⁵ Perhaps this is true as well for gender. Might it be difficult to see how racism is gendered when we are looking for it, when we expect to find it in most movements in most historical and spatial settings, when we assume its importance? Are we most comfortable, as Jane Atkinson noted, when gender ‘fairly screams out’ for comment and less clear what to do when gender is less salient?²⁶

Studies that look for gender in racist movements are easily caught up by the hyper-masculinist character of such movements. They are rife with bravado, guns, threats, definitiveness, the belittling of others, strength, boasts, swagger, and the embrace of social hierarchy. Yet there are other dynamics in these groups that are difficult to categorize as masculine: intrigue, gossip, treachery, drama, artifice, the centrality of bonds among members, performance, and perhaps most centrally, fear and anxiety. Does that mean that masculinity is irrelevant in racist movements? Assuredly not. But it does suggest that gender can be more complex in racist movements than we might see if we simply assume that gender matters. The ways that some racist groups represent themselves, and even their self-identity, is hyper-masculinized: racists are manly men, virile warriors, able to fight off enemies and usher in a white supremacist paradise. But, like the Klan’s historical continuity, the masculinist nature of organized racism can be a staged representation that obscures more interesting gendered dynamics.

²⁵ Michael Schwartz, Review of *The There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland*, *Mobilization* 10:1 (2005), pp. 192-194.

²⁶ Cited in Chodorow, ‘Seventies Questions’, p. 216.

In the 1920s, for example, white women were brought into the Klan as newly-enfranchised voters. Today, racist groups also recruit women. But in both cases, that they were women was somewhat beside the point. In the 1920s, white women were newly-enfranchised, thus tempting bait for a Klan hungry for votes for its electoral efforts and dues money for its financial empire. Today, women are targeted for recruitment at least in part because male racist leaders view women as less likely to have criminal records and therefore less vulnerable to becoming informants for, or targets of, the police. In both times, women were brought into organized racism for somewhat non-gendered reasons.

By assuming a priori that gender matters in organized racism, it can be difficult to see the intriguing ways in which it does. Put another way, we may need to rethink the move from asserting that gender matters in organized racism to assuming that gender matters similarly across time and contexts and thereby can be a starting point of analysis. How gender matters in organized racism requires not only that we see gender, but also that we see its limits, its cracks, and its fissures. To know when gender matters requires us to know when it does not.²⁷

Conclusion

How can we move ahead to understand gender on the political right? Certainly, it is not possible to operate without templates. They are the sea in which scholars swim, difficult to perceive or move beyond. But we can push against the constraints of current templates of the U.S. right by asking more specific questions about *how* and *to what extent* gender matters on the

²⁷ This is part of the project of historicizing gender, elaborated in Joanne Meyerowitz, 'A History of 'Gender'', *American Historical Review* 113:5 (2008), pp. 1346-1356.

right. Four questions are likely to be particularly productive in the next stages of studies of gender in rightist movements in the U.S.

First, *when* is gender most salient, meaningful, and effectual in collective rightist projects and when is it less so?²⁸ It is no longer sufficient to show that the U.S. far-right is gendered. Scholars now need to establish the differing levels at which gender matters and how it does so. Might gender be more salient in rightist movements that arise during periods of broader social contention over issues of gender, such as during the women's suffrage struggle or the feminist movement of the 1970s, than at other times? To what extent do rightist movements create new meanings for how gender is deployed in political efforts or rely on existing social understandings of gender and politics? To what extent are gender issues important in the success or failure of rightist movements?

Second, to *whom* does gender matter in the far right? Scholars of the right should pay more attention to the audiences for rightist movements.²⁹ They can include external audiences like prospective recruits, enemy groups, passive observers, and the media. As well, rightist movements have internal audiences such as competing rightist leaders, rank-and-file members, and even disgruntled members. It may be useful to distinguish the audiences to which rightist movements direct messages of gender, as well as to consider whether (in under what circumstances) far-right movements craft multiple, even competing messages for different audiences.

²⁸ Chodorow, 'Seventies Questions'.

²⁹ Kathleen Blee and Amy McDowell, 'Social Movement Audience', *Sociological Forum* (2012), forthcoming.

Third, what does gender matter *for*? In addition to establishing that the far-right is gendered, scholars might explore the work that gender does in rightist movements. Do highly gendered ideological frames or practices serve to recruit women or maintain male supremacy in rightist groups? Are they used as tactics or as long-term strategies, and toward what goals? Are rightist groups and movement self-conscious about their use of gender? Do they have internal conflicts over gender?

Finally, what is the *mechanism* by which gender matters, or does not?³⁰ Rightist movements differ in the process whereby they are gendered. Scholars may be able to tease out the specific dynamics of gender on the right by paying close attention to when rightist projects evoke gender, when they depend on gendered ideas and interpersonal relations, and when they might even erode existing ideas and arrangements of gender.

³⁰ Jennifer C. Nash, 'Re-thinking Intersectionality', *Feminist Review* 89 (2008), pp. 1-15.