Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan

Elaine Frantz Parsons

The Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan movement was intimately intertwined with, and completely dependent on, contemporary popular cultural forms and institutions. The degree and significance of this entanglement is most immediately obvious in the Klan’s origins in Pulaski, Tennessee. According to the founding member James R. Crowe, his fellow founder Frank McCord played the violin and Calvin Jones the guitar. The group would “go serenading and amuse ourselves as best we could.” In an unpublished 1911 historical novel about the Klan, Frank McCord’s younger brother Lapsley (himself an early member) remembered that in its early days “there were parties of them out nearly every evening calling upon their sweethearts.” Though that description does not mention musical performance, his account is consistent with serenading. It would, of course, be a mistake to accept early members’ self-interested explanations of their origins at face value. Fortunately, ample additional evidence supports their accounts. The future founders of the Klan first appeared in the post–Civil War public record working together in May 1866, about a month before the Klan was most likely founded. Three of the six founders, Richard Reed, J. C. Lester, and James Crowe, appeared in the *Pulaski Citizen* (edited by Frank McCord’s brother Luther) on a list of organizers of tableaux staged to raise funds to provide artificial limbs for maimed Confederate veterans. Crowe appeared in one scene as the emperor Aurelian, and Lester appeared in “Queen Elizabeth Discovering her Favorite’s [Sir Walter Raleigh’s] marriage.” Most of the scenes expressed domestic sentiment or provided opportunities for the belles and beaux of Pulaski to display themselves, though Crowe’s Zenobia and Aurelian tableau, for instance, had an obvious political message. McCord’s newspaper reflected that in the scene showing Zenobia, the conquered warrior princess, “raising her deprecating, but manacled hands,” “the fetters degraded not [her] but the haughty Roman [Aurelian] who had imposed them.” Just as these future Klan founders’ first public appearance was performative, so were two of the earliest Klan activities noticed by outsiders: a

Elaine Frantz Parsons is an assistant professor of history at Duquesne University. She wishes to thank the many people who have commented on earlier drafts of this article, including Fitzhugh Brundage, Mark Cosdon, Michael Fitzgerald, Carolyn Frantz, Rene Hayden, Mara Keire, Stephen Kamrowitz, Stephen Kercher, David Miller, Scott Reynolds Nelson, Jotham Parsons, Dorothy Ross, Frank Uekoetter, Ronald Walters, anonymous readers, members of the Duquesne University History Department, and participants in the Allegheny College humanities lecture series and the Johns Hopkins University History Department Seminar. Bob Wamble was generously willing to share his valuable personal collection of research materials related to the Ku Klux Klan and to inform her about other important primary sources despite the deep differences in their interpretation of the Pulaski Klan. This article was made possible by the financial support of the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, Faculty Development Fund, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Southern Studies Summer Stipend, and Duquesne University.

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Figure 1. This carte de visite, labeled "Midnight Rangers, Pulaski, Sept. 3rd 1866," may represent an early incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, the organization's birthplace. Courtesy Giles County Historical Society, Pulaski, Tennessee.

moonlight dance at which the Klan made a costumed appearance and a parade replete with costumes and musical entertainment.1

There is also material evidence of the Klan's theatrical roots. Frank McCord's fiddle still exists, in the custody of the Tennessee State Museum. More intriguing, a contemporary image supports such an account of the Klan's origins. (See figure 1.) Recently discovered by the independent historian Bob Wamble, the carte de visite likely represents an early incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan. The image, labeled "Midnight Rangers, Pulaski, Sept. 3, 1866," depicts seven young men with musical instruments, including fiddles, a guitar, and a banjo. Their informal dress, jaunty poses, hats askew, and choice of instruments indicate that they are performing in either the minstrel style or a closely related folk tradition. If the Klan founders were not the men depicted in this image, they were down the street doing the same thing; if the men in the picture were not the Klan, their name associated them with nocturnal violence. (To Civil War-era Americans, "rangers" were roaming groups of armed men of dubious legality.) While origins as an entertainment troupe may seem incidental to, or even inconsistent with, the violent group the Klan soon became, the Reconstruction-era Klan movement remained closely intertwined with popular cultural forms throughout its existence. Klansmen's mobilization of popular cultural traditions and popular cultural institutions' simultaneous appropriation of the image of the Klansman profoundly affected not only the spread of the Klan movement, but the nature and meaning of Klan actions. By attaching themselves to discourses about race, gender, civilization, and violence that had been built up through many years in such popular cultural forms as minstrelsy and carnival, Klansmen would develop and find ready audi-

1 James R. Crowe, "Origin of the Ku Klux Klan," Banner [1895–1908] (Giles County Historical Society Archives, Pulaski, Tenn.); Pulaski Citizen, May 1868, p. 4; Lapsley David McCord, "Red Gown," manuscript, [c. 1911]; Ku-Klux Klan Papers (Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis); Pulaski Citizen, May 4, 1866, pp. 3, 2; ibid., Aug. 2, 1867, p. 3; ibid., June 7, 1867, p. 3.
ences for new ideas about how civilization could dominate barbarism and mobilize it for its own purposes.

Though the Ku Klux Klan's bizarre costumes and performances were crucial to its development and proliferation and to its prominent place in American national memory, scholars have never provided a satisfactory explanation of their provenance and significance. By offering little interpretation beyond Klansmen's own claims that they dressed up for their own amusement, to avoid identification, or to frighten superstitious freed people, historians have tacitly endorsed those explanations. But they fail on a number of levels. Klan costumes were often quite elaborate. While Klansmen's desire to conceal identity motivated some elements of their costume and performance, such as masks and disguised voices, it sheds little light on the frequent surplus of Klan performance—the performative elements that were not efficiently directed toward practical ends. Klansmen's hopes of frightening freed people into submission do not fully explain the elaborate displays and claims they made not only to their victims but also to one another and to their supporters. While the costumes no doubt shaped how freed people understood the Klan, one may question how much even Klansmen believed that their costumes actually fooled blacks.

Most contemporary white southern claims about blacks' terror when confronted by the Klan were in the minstrel tradition. The same few stories (in the most common a ghostly Klansman asked for water and then drank an entire bucketful by pouring it into a receptacle concealed under his gown) circulated throughout the South. The teller had always heard it indirectly and did not name the people involved; the stories were intended to evoke laughter; and they seriously strained plausibility in their claims about both Klansmen's mechanical abilities and blacks' reactions. Some contemporaries vocally doubted that whites honestly believed their own claims of black gullibility. Klansmen did not limit their performance to freed people, either; they frequently made their claims of preternatural powers to white victims of their attacks and even to neutral or supportive whites. Finally, most Klan victims hardly required such a supplement of terror. As one freedman explained in recounting an attack by Klansmen wearing painted meal sacks over their heads, "The reason I was scared was, that they came in with their pistols, and I was afraid they would shoot me." Even where the Klan did not directly threaten violence, the arrival of unknown men at night was intimidating enough for most purposes. Klansmen used performance for reasons that lay far beyond any hopes of obscuring their identities or cowing their victims.2

Klansmen's theatrics were crucial to their movement, but not for the reasons that they claimed. Though Klansmen insisted that their actual and potential victims formed their intended audience, they were well aware of two other audiences. One was northern: As a conquered people trying to determine how far they could reassert white, Democratic

1 "Midnight Rangers, Pulaski, Sept. 3rd 1866," carte de visite, Pulaski Photograph Collection (Giles County Public Library, Pulaski, Tenn.); Allen Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspicacy and Southern Reconstruction (Baton Rouge, 1971), 57; testimony of John H. Chrisly in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Affairs of the Late Insurrectionary States, Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, part 6: Georgia, vol. I, 42 Cong., 2 sess., July 24, 1871, p. 239; testimony of Reuben Sheets, ibid., part 7: Georgia, vol. II, Oct. 27, 1871, p. 651; Trelease, White Terror, 56–58. The multivolume transcript of testimony before the Joint Select Committee was the result of a congressional investigation into allegations of southern political violence. Bipartisan teams of congressmen summoned witnesses to Washington and traveled to various southern states to hear testimony of alleged victims, perpetrators, and witnesses.
control without appearing explicitly to defy federal authority, Klansmen had everything to gain by encouraging northerners to read their attacks as theatrical, rather than political or military. By couching their attacks within often-elaborate performances derived from mid-nineteenth-century commercial popular culture and from the closely interrelated folk tradition of “rough music,” or charivari, Klansmen adopted a time-tested strategy of the weak. As James Scott has argued, “actual rebels mimic carnival—they dress as women or mask themselves when breaking machinery or making political demands; their threats use the features and symbolism of carnival” to “conceal their intentions” from those in power, who delay their response while attempting to determine whether the rebels are “playing or in earnest.” And indeed, as the North Carolina Republican judge Albion Tourgée perceptively noted in his historical novel, some of the northern press at first presented the Klan as “farcical” and “a piece of the broadest and most ridiculous fun.” The northerner generally responded to early accounts of “terrified darkies” as he (or she) had been trained to do by the minstrel stage, by “laugh[ing] himself into tears and spasms.” But perhaps the audience that was most influenced by Klan performance consisted of white, Democratic southerners. While scholars have frequently maintained that lynch mobs in post-Redemption years were participating in communal rituals, historians of the Klan have not sufficiently explored the extent to which Klansmen were performing for themselves and other southern whites. Klansmen used their violent theatrics not only to reimpose white, male Democratic dominance but also, by appropriating the symbolic language of minstrelsy, carnival, and related popular forms, to construct a more resilient white, male, southern identity.3

It is an understatement to say that the Klan used performative elements in its attacks; performative elements largely produced the movement. Once one begins to look seriously at the Klan’s connections to popular entertainment, the breadth of those connections is striking. From this perspective, the Klan was conceived in a tableau vivant, nurtured by minstrels and serenaders, housed by circuses and masquerades, and given an afterlife in Mardi Gras processions. It was a creature of popular culture that political leaders attempted to harness only after they noted its proliferation, and with minimal success. Popular entertainment profoundly shaped the forms that Klan violence took and what that violence meant to Klansmen, their victims, and witnesses; and the Klan was immediately reabsorbed and reproduced by popular cultural institutions, which were the most powerful vectors for the Klan’s growth.

That not all Ku-Klux engaged in excessive theatrics does not undermine this argument. Because no one has studied the geography or chronology of Klan costume use, it is impossible to say what proportion of self-proclaimed Klansmen were disguised or what proportion of the disguises went beyond the practical obscuring of identity. Contemporaries

implied that it was probable but not inevitable that a Klansman would be costumed. That is, questioners tended to ask whether a Klansman was costumed rather than how he was costumed, and witnesses tended to volunteer information on disguise in their descriptions of attacks, but they sometimes said nothing about even lavish disguises until specifically asked, suggesting that they did not consider the disguise worth mentioning. Yet even uncostumed or barely costumed Klansmen got the benefit of the cultural significance of their costumed brethren. They consumed popular cultural representations of the Klan, benefited and suffered from the publicity they generated, and either aligned themselves with, or could not disentangle themselves from, the dominating cultural complex of ideas surrounding their disguised peers.

By the autumn of 1868, slightly more than two years after the Klan's inauspicious beginnings, groups of men throughout the South were identifying themselves as Klansmen. Given early Klan proponents' almost complete lack of the resources normally required for social mobilization, this proliferation was startling, even to the founders. Years later, the only full-length history of the Klan written by a founder grasped for an explanation of the Klan's success, characterizing it as a "wave of excitement, spreading by contagions till the minds of a whole people [were] in ferment" and rhapsodizing over "the weird potency in the very name Ku Klux Klan." Had the founders chosen another name, it insisted, the Klan would never have made it out of Pulaski. Much more than the organizational efforts of Tennessee elites who saw the Klan's potential as a political force by 1867, it was the Klan's successful appropriation of free-floating popular cultural tropes that made the rapid proliferation possible. The Klan took on a life of its own, powered more by the resonance of its content then by anyone's deliberate strategy.¹

In an age in which other social movements churned out tracts by the thousands, advertised their functions in their own and in mainstream newspapers, and created national lecture circuits, the Klan could use such crucial techniques only indirectly and cryptically. The handwritten notices and warnings, the meetings called by whistles, the galloping messengers on horseback that became emblematic of the Reconstruction-era Klan were figures of Klansmen's inability to mobilize nineteenth-century technology and organizational techniques. Likewise, the story of Luther McCord's heroic midnight printing of the Klan Prescript (which included the Klan creed, membership requirements, questions to be asked of potential members, and a required oath) on his small-town press, an important part of early Klan lore, underlines the Klan's struggle for resources that other successful movements would take for granted.³ Though all social movements latched onto existing cultural beliefs and cultural forms and all relied on press coverage, the Klan, unable to mass-distribute its own texts, was especially parasitical on popular cultural institutions largely financed and closely observed by its political opponents.

That left those politically oriented southerners who hoped to shape the Klan with two problems. First, it was impossible to control, or even to keep track of, the membership and activities of Klan groups without robust and official channels of communication. The necessity of secrecy and indirect speech and the reluctance to keep written records made organizational centralization impossible. Second, aspiring leaders of the Klan movement lacked the means and authority to control how the Klan was represented to the public.

² The Klan Prescript is reprinted in Lester and Wilson, Ku Klux Klan, ed. Fleming, 153–54, 170–73.
While they could circulate their views among many competing voices, they could not
decisively intervene in public debates over who was a Klan member or what the Klan
intended or stood for. Those aspiring to organize the Klan movement were more successful
in some places than in others, particularly middle and western Tennessee and North Car-
olina. Yet even those organized groups never came close to controlling the Klan’s public
image. The leaders of the organized Klan constantly complained that many people who
began calling themselves Klansmen as the movement spread in and after 1868 were freel-
cancers with no organizational ties to any core Klan group.  

The historian Allen Trelease suspected that most Klan groups were “inspired by reports
of Klans in other areas but not organically connected to them.” Given the lack of central-
ization, it is not surprising that those who chose to call themselves Klansmen and were
popularly accepted as Klansmen did not even share common motivations. Lifting the
Klan mask revealed a chaotic multitude of antiblack vigilante groups, disgruntled poor
white farmers, wartime guerrilla bands, displaced Democratic politicians, illegal whis-
key distillers, coercive moral reformers, bored young men, sadists, rapists, white work-
men fearful of black competition, employers trying to enforce labor discipline, common
thieves, neighbors with decades-old grudges, and even a few freedmen and white Repub-
licans who allied with Democratic whites or had criminal agendas of their own. Indeed,
all they had in common, besides being overwhelmingly white, southern, and Democratic,
was that they called themselves, or were called, Klansmen. Klan leaders who attempted to
distinguish between the “real” and “false” Klan were spectacularly unsuccessful; attempts
to do so retroactively have merely obscured the fact that the Klan was not an organization
struggling to police its boundaries but a heterogeneous mass movement that included or-
ganized elements. As much as their motivations varied, many men chose to don costumes
that had strong common features, to spread a common set of stories, to engage in a com-
mon pattern of performative behavior, and thereby to identify themselves with the popu-
lar figure of the Klansman. What tied Klansmen together and caused them and others to
understand their actions as part of a greater whole was the powerful and multivalent im-
age of the Klansman that emerged through popular culture.  

Performative representations of the Klan frequently preceded or arrived alongside the
spread of Klan violence. As early as May 1868, the Klansman Ryland Randolph’s newspa-
paper, the Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, advertised the performance of a Professor Fred-
erick, whose demonstration with the dagger “and other Ku-Kluxian instruments” would
convince “his most skeptical observer that he is the spirit of some Confederate soldier
who has eaten nothing since he was killed at the first battle of Manassas.” The dyspeptic
Klan leader Randolph Shotwell later complained that in the early days “even circuses bur-
lesqued Ku Klux Klans by extravagant performances.” Minstrel acts did the same: a min-
strel troupe called the Whitney Family promised “a mirth-provoking, side-splitting Af-
terpiece entitled ‘Dr. Hemlock’s Trials! Or Secrets of the Ku-Klux Klan Exposed.’” Some
witnesses claimed that, to their knowledge, the Klan existed only in popular culture. An
Alabama Klan sympathizer, asked if he had ever before seen a Klan costume, replied typi-
cally, “No, sir, only in the circus.” In 1868 a pro-Klan Georgia newspaper advertised a
piece of sheet music entitled “The Ku Klux Polkawaltz” under the heading, “Here’s your
Ku Klux.” A northern minstrel songbook published in the same year capitalized on the

6 Trelease, White Terror, 13–27.
7 Ibid., 51.
emerging Ku-Klux craze with a headliner song about a man who witnesses the terrible and bloody deeds of the Klan only to realize at the end that he has only been having a beery dream.8

The claim that the Ku-Klux was purely fictional, a mere cultural representation, became a major argument of those attempting to defuse northern horror at reports of Klan violence. That claim had been implicit in the Klan identity from its origins. Klansmen were “ghosts.” Their empire was an “invisible” one. Even the name of the organization was not to be committed to paper. It was fundamental to both self-representations and popular representations of the Klan that its existence remain in doubt. It is appropriate, then, that some early witnesses and victims, when they first encountered actual Klansmen, believed they were seeing performers. When Thompson C. Hawkins, a postal agent who was threatened by Klansmen in Livingston, Alabama, first saw the group, he thought they were traveling entertainers. “They had on caps or hats . . . and in front something like a white paper. . . . That attracted my attention, or called it to believe that they belonged to a band of music.” A Freedmen’s Bureau agent in Huntsville, Alabama, mistook a Klan group for an “advance of some circus company.” Conversely, when a group of “masked serenaders made its appearance on the square, with horns, bells, tin pans” in Pontotoc, Mississippi, locals attacked them in the belief that they were Klansmen (whether they had violent intentions is unclear).9

There is even some evidence that other groups, like the original Pulaski Klan, evolved through a stage of vaguely menacing theatricality before constituting themselves as Klansmen. In August 1867, for instance, the diarist Samuel Agnew, a white rural Mississippi minister who sparked controversy by preaching to freed people, recorded that “a crowd of the Baldwyns came down in the train” and “serenad[ed] our citizens tonight,” “playing a few tunes” outside his own home. Within a year, Baldwyn would emerge as the local hot spot for Klan violence, and in 1869 Klansmen paid a visit to Agnew’s home. Local Klans frequently made purely performative appearances before they moved to violent attacks. It was conventional for Klans to announce their organization in a town by staging parades; for the fortunate majority, such parades would be the only sight they got of the terrorists. References to parades pepper witness accounts. A Noxubee County, Mississippi, planter claimed that there had been “several parades” of Klansmen in his county in the past year. A Greene County, Alabama, Radical Republican politician said that he knew of “a great many,” though he had never seen one. Most of the parades were probably more like political processions than like parades of popular entertainers—displays of force with


few carnivalesque elements—but adornment was not uncommon. The Klan leader Randolph Shotwell was disgusted that other groups who falsely (in his opinion) claimed to be Klansmen “marched into villages in masked processions with stuffed elephants and other grotesque animals.”

Its very theatricality profoundly shaped how participants and other contemporaries interpreted the Klan movement. Both Klan members’ decisions to wear costumes and the costumes they chose ensured that Klan attacks would be read as in part theatrical and understood in terms of popular entertainment. By marking their attacks as performative, Klansmen told observers that they had adopted the role of the unfamiliar, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. They created a theatrical space in which conventional rules would not apply. The Klan’s theatrical behavior also signaled that Klansmen meant to be looked at, rather than interacted with, and that they intended to astonish their viewers. It implied that the unfolding events would be more like a show than like a political meeting, a marketplace, a battle, or a brawl. Klansmen thus instructed their victims and witnesses how to behave during their attack, establishing a distance between themselves and their viewers and suggesting that the “visit” was scripted. In the Reconstruction-era South, where freed people were increasingly asserting their own agency, the very form of the Klan attack relegated them to passive spectatorship.

Klansmen were selective in their appropriations from popular culture, however, and the types of entertainments they drew from illuminate the significance of their theatricality. In choreographing their attacks, they did not draw from prizefighting, domestic fiction, or the new sport of baseball but from carnivalesque genres such as minstrelsy, Mardi Gras, the circus, folk serenading, and rough music. Those traditions centered on comic inversion and jumbled together varied and discordant elements. Indeed, by the Reconstruction era, minstrel shows and circuses, informal carnival, and serenading traditions had become so intermixed (one would often include another; circuses and carnivals commonly featured minstrels) that it was difficult to imagine what costume or type of performance might appear in one but not the others. They differed, however, in their sponsorship, organization, and social exclusivity. Official Mardi Gras krewes had a distinct style, with high-cultural, polished, regimented, and conspicuously expensive spectacles with themes such as Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene. And after public parades, krew members retired to exclusive private masquerade balls. Minstrel shows enjoyed a less refined audience; the same could be said of circuses. Both were deeply embedded in, and organized around, the constraints and logic of commercial culture. As somewhat established institutions, they were accountable for their performances. They could not afford regularly to offend audience members, to deliver a different sort of show than the audience had paid for, to excite controversy, or to cross authorities.

10 Samuel Agnew Diary, Aug. 6, 1867, Sept. 1, 1869 (Southern Historical Collection); Pulaski Citizen, June 7, 1867, p. 4; testimony of John R. Taliaferro in Joint Select Committee, Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, part 11: Mississippi, vol. 1, July 15, 1871, p. 228; testimony of William Miller, ibid., part 8: Alabama, vol. 1, June 2, 1871, p. 9; Shotwell, “Ku-Klux Chronicles.”


The other popular forms were unsponsored. Official Mardi Gras krewes were invariably engulfed in a chaotic sea of much more outrageous popular masking, unstructured and accountable only to the crowd itself. Folk serenading and rough music were the freest of all the carnivalesque forms. In those traditions, self-appointed groups of young men, with a deliberate mixture of humor and menace, visited the homes of marginal or disgraced members of the community, performing cacophonous music and often demanding either a change in behavior or a gift. In a gentler but still potentially menacing version, they might visit the home of a wealthy man or attractive young woman demanding a gift or a sign of favor. While Klan attacks bore the most functional similarity to the informal serenades, Klansmen drew from all the carnivalesque forms. The structural differences did matter; most concretely, association with institutionalized forms such as minstrelsy or carnival krewes could lend legitimacy.

This complex of performances was also deeply implicated in the work of racial and gender redefinition. Though it is doubtful that they did so consciously or deliberately, Klansmen repeatedly found themselves drawn to heavily coded popular cultural practices and images that would enable them to rebuild ideas about manhood, race, and violence that had been destabilized by the war. The success of Klansmen in sending their complex and potentially treacherous cultural messages—asserting their manhood and their suitability as leaders of a new civilized South by dressing up in outlandish costumes—was due to the use of the framework already built in the early national and antebellum years by minstrel and carnival traditions.13

It is worth reviewing how Klan costumes, in particular, related to contemporary minstrelsy and carnival. Klan costumes ranged from lavish gowns and headpieces with matching disguises for horses to pieces of cheap cloth worn over the face. (See figure 2.) Some Klansmen wore pants with short jackets or a normal suit of men’s clothing turned inside out. Some members of a South Carolina group donned masks made of squirrel skin. Some costumes featured “all kinds of fixings,” from one to four horns pointing up or down, fake beards, or tassels. Some Klansmen wore “scarlet stockings” underneath their costumes. Some attached pieces of reflective metal to their disguises. Some had red paper hats with “square stars tacked about on” them. One victim described the costumes of the men who attacked him as “white gowns, and some had flax linen, and red calico, and some red caps, and white horns stuffed with cotton. And some had flannel around coon-skin caps, and faces on, and next to the caps their gowns came down so that I could not see only the legs below the knees . . . only a little hole at the eyes, not bigger than a man’s finger nail.” Another witness described a band as wearing “a mass of white, red, and black on the face. I think probably it was ribbon fitted over the face, and head and hair covered, and large
Figure 2. This image, created a few years after the decline of the Ku Klux Klan, illustrates the combination of comedy and terror central to the Klan's aesthetic. "The Masked Sentinel," reprinted from Albion Tourgée, The Invisible Empire (New York, 1880). Courtesy Special Collections, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College.

Klansmen sometimes explained the meanings of their costumes to their victims. Klansmen frequently claimed to be ghosts of the Confederate dead; this was probably Klansmen's most popular disguise. They often claimed to have returned to earth by way of hell. The idea of posing as a denizen of hell to frighten freed people preceded the formation of the Klan. The Pulaski Citizen reported in March 1866, in the tongue in cheek style common to newspapers of the time, that a huge, monstrous, fire-breathing creature with cloven hooves and horns had visited four households of freed people in Bracken County, Kentucky. In a follow-up a month later, the Citizen reassured its readers that this "devil" had been apprehended; it had only been a clever thief who used his disguise to frighten his victims away from their possessions. Though politically oriented Klan groups strove to distance themselves from those Klansmen most interested in pilfering, there is a nice case here that common criminals were present at the creation.15

15 Testimony of Daniel Coleman in Joint Select Committee, Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, part 9: Alabama, vol. II, Oct. 9, 1871, p. 661. See also testimony of Hon. Peter M. Dox, ibid., part 8: Alabama, vol. I, July 11, 1871, p. 457; testimony of Jo-
Other recurring performative identities also marked Klansmen as threatening outsiders. To signal that they were “outlanders,” or foreigners, some Klansmen assumed foreign accents that victims identified as Irish, German, or French. Others dressed or acted as Native Americans, an identity that in contemporary minds combined foreignness and amoral savagery. Still other Klansmen assumed the characteristics of animals. It is interesting (and reflects the materials they had ready access to in making their costumes) that their tastes ran less toward wild than toward domestic animals such as cows, mules, and goats. Some Klan costumes sported cows’ and mules’ tails or mules’ ears. The favorite animal feature, however, was that most phallic of accessories, the animal horn, sometimes up to two feet in length, which they would occasionally thrust at their victims. Examples also abound of Klansmen mimicking animal behavior and sounds.16

Both the costumes and theatricks of the Klan evoked contemporary popular performance. With a few exceptions, such as the claim to be from the moon, which pops up in at least three states, the costumed identities were staples of minstrelsy and carnival. Nineteenth-century minstrel shows frequently featured ghosts or Indians—often characters dressed as ghosts or Indians to scare or trick gullible blacks. (See figure 3.) Klansmen mimicked contemporary showmen in other ways as well. A party of Tennessee Klansmen allegedly assailed their white northern victim while wearing red and white polka-dotted pyramid-shaped hats, masks with beards made of white fringe, “white pants with red stripe,” and “a long white robe, trimmed in red,” and while brandishing a flag that was “flesh colored, and in the shape of a heart.” They drew their victim’s attention to the flag, which, they said, “meant Kuklux.” One Alabama Klansman “commenced some mystical flourishes with his pistols . . . and in a few minutes returned again and went through the same performance.” In the course of a particularly sadistic attack, Klansmen staged their own circus, first forcing their black victims to act like horses, then performing for them, “puking” fire out of their mouths. A South Carolina Klan band “jumped around” its


victims "and asked them whether they liked liquor. . . . They took them out and danced around them; they behaved like fools." While the reference to liquor reminds us of one factor contributing to many Klansmen's grotesque behavior, some Klansmen went to great lengths to establish a theatrical atmosphere. Writing a later fictionalized account of the Klan's Pulaski beginnings, Frank McCord's brother Lapsley, an early Klansman, described the Klan as using torches and fireworks to make "wholesale spectacular . . . demonical theatricals."

Connections between the Klan and the carnivalesque abound. Elizabeth Meriwether, a Memphis Klan insider and the author of a pro-Klan farce featuring a Klan trickster figure, hinted at a connection between the Klan and carnival by setting her play in New Orleans. Though the play does not include any direct reference to Mardi Gras celebrations, her adolescent sons, corresponding about her play in the year it was written, referred to it as “a book . . . on Mardi Gras.” Klan riders sometimes wore disguises that had been manufactured for private masquerades. Congressmen interrogated Joseph F. Gist, a South Carolinian suspected of being a Klansman, at length about the costumes he had seen at a local “fancy dress” party in Union County, South Carolina. His description of the “dominos,” long cloaks with hoods worn as masquerade costumes, indeed closely matched victims’ and witnesses’ descriptions of Klan costumes in the same area. “The men, most of them, had on gowns” of “various” colors, including black, white, blue, and red. “The hood was drawn over [the head] with holes for the eyes.” A black seamstress, Christina Page, had made some of the costumes; although she was understandably reticent with the congressional committee, her description of the dominoes she produced was consistent with descriptions of Klan costumes. A local white, William A. Bolt, insisted that the masquerade costumes were the same as those worn for local raids. Klansmen appropriated other elements of masquerade costumes: two witnesses near Spartanburg, South Carolina, claimed that the Klan group they saw wore “dough-faces like you see in the stores,” presumably for masquerades. A former congressman from Georgia said that someone had displayed “some clothing that some young men wore at a masquerade ball” in Atlanta, falsely claiming that the garments were Ku-Klux costumes. He dismissed Klan atrocities, explaining that “sometimes, mischievous boys who want to have some fun go on a masquerading frolic to scare the negroes,” and that Republicans exaggerated and distorted such behavior for political benefit.18

As the story of the Pulaski Klan suggests, there were also numerous ties among commercial minstrelsy; its popular cousin, folk serenading; and the Klan. One memoirist claimed that he had been recruited for the Klan on the basis of his skill as a blackface minstrel. The congressional committee interrogated a professional minstreler, John Christy, about his role in a Klan attack in Meridian, Mississippi. Many Klan bands resembled the traveling minstrel troupes referred to by contemporaries as “serenaders.” Some of those Klan groups performed music—oddly, one (anti-Klan) freedman reported that “it was the prettiest music you ever saw.” More than a dozen people menaced Truman Root, of Columbia, South Carolina, stamping on his piazza; scattering sticks, pieces of paper, and wads of cotton around his home; insulting him; and playing gongs and horns, in what they referred to as a “tin-pan serenade.” Klansmen in other regions retained some memory of their minstrel origins. The North Carolinian leader Randolph Shotwell dismissed the

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Pulaski Klansmen as having been nothing more than a “burlesque association” that lacked the serious political purpose of the later group.\(^9\)

While some Klan bands performed music, others gave ostensibly comic performances similarly reminiscent of the minstrel stage. When Klansmen brutally attacked the paraplegic freedman Elias Hill, he testified, one “took a strap and buckled it around my neck and said, ‘Let’s take him to the river and drown him,’ ‘What course is the river?’ they asked me. I told them, ‘east.’ Then one of them went feeling about, as if he was looking for something, and said, ‘I don’t see no eat! Where is the d—d thing?’ as if he did not understand what I meant.” Klansmen attacking a white Republican engaged in another strange routine. After roaming around the house in which he was staying,

at last they came to the bed [where he lay, the Republican told the committee] and asked the boys, [in a thin treble voice] “Who is this?” The boys said they had an old gentleman staying all night there. He said, [in a thin treble voice], “What is he?” Another said, [in deep bass], “A damned rad.” . . . They came to the bed; one came to the foot and the other to the head; and the one at the foot smelled all around at the foot of the bed, and he says, [in deep bass], “He’s a damned old rad.” The other one said, [in sharp treble] “Is he fat?” The other answered, [in bass], “Yes.” The other said, [in treble], “Well, we’ll eat him then; get out of bed.”

During their attacks Klansmen often put on such performances on a smaller scale. W. H. Purdom, an elections official in Marshall County, Tennessee, was visited by Klansmen who “walked round the house a little bit and went out, [one of them] talking some of his foolish talk” in a disguised voice. In the same county, the schoolteacher M. A. Glenn described the Klan as “talking and going on with their foolishness.” Speaking in fake foreign accents or in otherwise altered voices was a feature of Klan performance as it was of minstrelsy. Many props and accessories used by Klansmen, from false fire and red stockings to dominoes, masks, false facial hair, and, of course, face blacking, would have been available through theatrical suppliers. Klansmen sometimes went to great lengths to stage their violence as comedy.\(^20\)

But the most explicit way in which Klansmen evoked the minstrel and carnivalesque was in their assumption of “female garb” and blackface. So many victims of and witnesses to Klan attacks, in so many places and over such a length of time, described Klan costumes as similar to women’s clothes that the resemblance could not have been accidental. The congressional hearings alone contain many such references. One South Carolina victim said of his attackers, “Some of them had calico dresses; others had on homespun dresses, paper hats, & c.; every man was disguised.” Another described them as wearing “a dark colored something that fitted around them something like a lady’s dress and came down about the knee.” An Alabama man described his attackers’ costumes as “like a


lady's dress, only open before." The Georgia man Eli Barnes first detected the Klan's presence when he heard a "rattle . . . like a woman's garment." His suspicion was confirmed when he saw "a great many persons with long gowns on; I did not know whether they were men or women." A Tennessee freedmen's aid agent claimed that one of those who attacked him was "dressed in women's clothes, and was called the woman of the party." When a white Georgia justice of the peace first saw the Klan, he thought they looked like "a heap of women" and claimed that he mistook them for a midnight bridal party seeking his services from across the Alabama border. A U.S. Army officer looking for evidence of Klan activity found a "long black cambric dress; it may have been a woman's riding-habit and may have been a Ku-Klux gown, we could not tell." A black South Carolina woman whose husband had been killed by the Klan compared the fabric of the attackers' costumes to that of the white cotton frock she was wearing during her testimony.21

It would be tempting to suggest that Klansmen had no intention of dressing as women and that their victims and opponents described their costumes as women's clothes as an insult, in the same genre as the famous story of Jefferson Davis's fleeing in his wife's clothes. No doubt many victims intended such descriptions as insults, but Klansmen's appropriation of women's dress was sometimes intentional. As scholars of both vigilante violence and carnivalesque performance have emphasized, there were numerous precedents. In addition to many well-known European and early American examples of vigilantes in female dress, there were some much closer to home: a September 1865 article in the Knoxville Whig claimed that "at a colored ball . . . three colored persons were killed in one night by white men dressed in Women's Clothes." Furthermore, some witnesses claimed that their attackers' costumes not only resembled, but were, women's clothes, which would make their appropriation deliberate. Essic Harris, a North Carolina Klan victim, said of Klan marauders, "Some of them had on some women's clothes." A North Carolina woman recognized a Klansman because "he had his wife's old dress on; a dress that I had seen many a time." A Georgia woman similarly recognized a man by identifying his costume as his wife's dress.22

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Given the very limited number of pro-Klan sources that describe Klan costumes, evidence of Klansmen’s own understanding of their disguise is anecdotal. But three pro-Klan texts relate Klan costumes to women’s clothes. When interrogated in the congressional hearings, the former Georgia congressman and suspected Klan supporter John H. Christy, while arguing that many alleged Klan costumes were innocent masquerade costumes, even if mischievous young men sometimes wore them to scare Negroes, insisted that he knew nothing about the Klan. Asked if he had witnessed “any man in disguise,” he came forward with a rather intimate anecdote:

A. No; not under any circumstances whatever that I remember, unless it was a son of mine who was trying to scare his little sister one night.

Q. What did he put on?

A. He put on his mother’s dress, or something of that sort; it was a family concern. I do not suppose you want to hear that, but as I am under oath I mentioned it.

Q. How old is your son?

A. Some seventeen or eighteen years old.

It is not clear whether the young man was experimenting with cross-dressing (though even if that troubled his sister, one wonders why it would “scare” her) or was preparing for an evening of persecuting freed people. Perhaps he was impersonating a Klansman for his sister’s benefit. At any rate, it is telling that the committee’s question brought the incident to Christy’s mind. J. E. Robuck’s assumption of feminine garb is much easier to interpret. According to his 1900 memoir, Robuck had been unenthusiastic about secession at the war’s beginning. To shame him into volunteering, three young ladies had sent him some ladies’ garments, including a hoop skirt and a dress. He wrote that he had laughed it off at the time. Ultimately, he was drafted into the Confederate army. Soon after the war’s close, he joined the Klan. As he put it, “I kept the Mother Hubbard frock until after the war, when it served me a good purpose. I had it transformed into a Ku-Klux robe.”

But the most extended reference to Klan costumes as women’s clothes is in a pro-Klan comedy written in 1877, half a decade after the Klan’s decline. To the limited degree that the Klan had an inner circle, Elizabeth Avery Meriwether had been in it. She was the wife of Minor Meriwether, who was probably Grand Scribe to Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest. She and her husband were friends of Matthew Galloway, the editor of the Klan’s most influential organ, the Memphis Avalanche, and (off and on) of Forrest himself. Most of her play, The Ku-Klux Klan; or, The Carpetbagger in New Orleans, traces the efforts of a Confederate amputee, Peter Plucky, to emerge from suicidal despair to renewed manliness. It is an extreme early example of a “romance of reunion,” as Plucky’s beautiful daughter, Polly, falls in love with the handsome and right-minded Union amputee Tom-as Truegrit, who ultimately determines not only to marry her but also to enter into a business partnership with her father on the theory that together they make up one whole man.

23 Testimony of Christy, ibid., July 24, 1871, p. 245; J. E. Robuck, My Own Personal Experience and Observation as a Soldier in the Confederate Army During the Civil War, 1861–1865; Also During the Period of Reconstruction—Appendix a History of the Origin, Rise, Career and Disbanding of the Famous Ku-Klux Klan, or Invisible Empire. Exactly Why, When, and Where it Originated (n.p., 1900), 15.

24 Minor Meriwether’s role in the Memphis Klan is mentioned in Tielease, White Terror, 183; Elizabeth Avery Meriwether to Rivers and Avery Meriwether, May 15, 1876; folder 51, box 1, Meriwether Family Papers; Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900 (Chapel Hill, 1993).
The play, however, also includes a second set of characters: “The Widow Secesh” and her five sons, Generl, Kernel, Cappen, Major, and Kuklux. This family is a probably deliberate adaptation of the minstrel band, with four indistinguishable brothers, Kuklux as the “end man,” and the mother as the interlocutor. Fittingly, in the play the reality of these characters is ambiguous. Since they lack surnames and are invisible to those around them, they at first appear to be purely allegorical figures like those Meriwether created in another play, but in midplay they begin to interact with other characters and are revealed to be cousins to the Plucky family. All but Kuklux have been “whipped” by the war: “their heads hang in hopeless dejection” as they allow “oily” northern carpetbaggers, up-pity blacks, and scalawags to run over them roughshod. Kuklux, “grotesque in dress and behavior,” is a trickster figure who secretly “performs the most amazing antics” to subvert this new dispensation. His mother, who suspects that he is up to mischief, sees something poking out of his pocket and tells Generl to grab it:

**GENERL** collars **KUKLUX** and pulls a long white garment from his pocket.
**GENERL.** [Holding it up] What on yeartth is he a doin’ with such female togbery?
**WIDOW.** [Holds up hands in astonishment] If I ever!—No I never!—Wisher may die, ef it aint my old night gound!
**GENERL, KERNEL, CAPPEN AND MAJOR** all hang their heads in deep shame.
**KUKLUX.** [Grinning at them] Wat a parcel o’ old Tom-cat fools!—a blushin’ an’ a hangin’ yer heads over mammy’s old cotton night gound! Wat’s the harm?

Soon after this startling revelation, the scene shifts to a courtroom where the brothers (minus Kuklux, who has slipped away) are on trial for a crime against freed people that they did not commit. At the height of the action, Kuklux enters, dons a lady’s hat and shawl and goes around the courtroom, “play[ing] grotesque tricks, threatening vengeance on the Judge and [the all-black] JURY.” The fact that Meriwether, an intimate of the Memphis Klan elite, identified Klan disguises with women’s clothes shows that the idea was familiar to at least some influential Klan supporters.25

The final type of popular culture–inspired disguise that Klansmen favored was blackface. It was common for Klansmen to blacken, tan, or smut their faces or to wear black masks. Like “female togbery,” blackface evoked both popular cultural staples such as carnival and, especially, minstrelsy and a long tradition of vigilante costuming. David R. Roediger and others have described the tradition of “blackface on black violence.” Blackface emerged early in the Klan’s history; it may be significant that in early 1867 the *Pulaski Citizen* printed an article giving tips on how to remove tan from one’s face, though that might simply testify to the presence of a vibrant local minstrel culture. A South Carolina victim described some Klansmen who attacked him as having “some smut, as it looked to be, from a chimney, rubbed on their hands and faces. Their faces were blackened, but not very black.” Other victims and witnesses in South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi described their attackers as having burnt cork or other blacking on their faces. Some Klansmen also tangled their hair. Victims and witnesses frequently told congressional investigators that they were unsure of the racial identities of their attackers, because their skin was either colored or entirely concealed from view. That was one practical value of cross-racial dressing: Klansmen loved to claim that black men posing as Klansmen

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25 Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *The Ku-Klux Klan; or, The Carpet-Bagger in New Orleans* (Memphis, 1877), 4, 15, 42, 47.
to settle private quarrels or discredit the Klan were responsible for their worst atrocities. Klansmen also occasionally (and without much success) attempted to infiltrate the enemy camp by posing as black.26

On the most obvious level, Klansmen's appropriation of blackface and female apparel worked as a carnivalesque inversion. Fearing that their white manhood had been called into question by their defeat, Klansmen self-parodically assumed a female or black identity, much as nineteenth-century street gangs such as the Plug-Uglies or Dead Rabbits defiantly took on degrading monikers. Through humorous inversion, Klansmen emphasized gender and racial difference. The deliberate and apparent ludicrousness of their inversions underlined their real manhood and whiteness in the classic manner of the carnivalesque. Robuck's story and Meriwether's play suggest how Klansmen's use of women's clothing reasserted challenged manhood. By assuming the guise of women while exercising physical coercion, defeated white men such as Robuck simultaneously owned and transcended their humiliation. Given the Klan's project of restoring southern white manhood, it is fitting that the Pulaski Klan founders first gathered to raise funds for Confederate amputees.27

Donning the minstrel mask could indicate the wearer's white identity. Klansmen testified to their whiteness even as they performed blackness. The literary critic Walter Benn Michaels—reflecting on the irony that Klansmen who were terrified lest miscegenation and the end of the status of slave make racial identity invisible wore costumes that did make racial identity invisible—has argued that Klan costumes policed the borders of whiteness. The symbolic, voluntarily assumed whiteness of many Klan costumes indicated inner whiteness—a whiteness for which white skin was a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite. The historian Scott Nelson has argued that Klan rituals either symbolically or physically emasculated their victims; in much the same way, Klansmen used their raids to mark some whites as outside the race. One group forced a white man to kiss the "private parts" of a black man and woman and to enact intercourse with the woman. A group in Mississippi described their white schoolteacher victim as being "as black inside as that old nigger woman is outside." A white Georgia man thought to be on excessively good terms with his black employees complained that Klan raiders "treated me rather as if I was a freedman, or worse, perhaps. They called me 'boy' and ordered me around." Whether wearing minstrel cork, shrouding themselves in white sheets, or donning other racially obscuring disguises, Klansmen were drawing racial lines to restore the apparent clarity formerly provided by the institution of slavery.28


27 Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion, 110.

Yet nineteenth-century carnivalesque costuming sent multiple messages; it was this ambiguity that made it so valuable to the white southerners who appropriated it. On the minstrel stage as in carnivalesque masquerades, there was often a slippage both between the costume wearer's everyday and assumed identities and between the audience's desire to distance itself from and identify with the blackface figures it viewed. While it is counterintuitive to imagine Klansmen as identifying with their black victims, Klansmen in some ways identified with the black bodies they simultaneously mimicked and tortured. Like bulls, Comanches, or damned soldiers, black men were not only placed beyond the pale of conventional morality but were also stereotyped as strong and violent. Violence had always helped constitute the southern man's self-image, but the passage through the war and southern white men's temporarily weakened grasp on the reins of mastery during Reconstruction dramatically changed the nature and meaning of the violence. Dressing as black men, who were portrayed on the minstrel stage and conventionally understood as controlled by an overwhelming physical and sexual nature, allowed Klansmen, like antebellum minstrel audiences, to acknowledge and claim "uncivilized" impulses within a discrete performative space. White men imagined freed people, like Native Americans or beasts, as fundamentally outside civilization. Wearing blackface enabled former Confederates imaginatively to appropriate barbaric power, while differentiating black savagery and white civilization. Just as early national and antebellum whites turned to blackface-on-black violence to address class anxieties, Reconstruction-era southern white men turned to it to address anxieties about shifting race relations and the associated changes in political and economic structures. The strategy needed to be managed with some subtlety and could easily go awry. Blackfaced Klansmen appropriated the lawless violence they attributed to those outside civilization even as their decision to commit their atrocities in easily shed costumes distanced them from their violent deeds. Klansmen may have seen a metaphorical truth in their frequent lie that their most appalling attacks had been committed by black men.29

The significance of dressing like a woman was closer to that of blackface than one might expect. Since nineteenth-century women were imagined as particularly moral and selfless, dressing like a woman could potentially signify that the Klansman was driven by high rather than low motives. Less obviously, it too could be a way to appropriate uncivilized characteristics. Natalie Zemon Davis has described early modern cross-dressers as drawing on "the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman." In the Reconstruction-era United States, white women were no longer associated with excessive and uncontrolled physical desires. Yet this older idea had reified itself in a tradition of cross-dressed vigilantism that continued long after the culture from which it emerged had faded. In donning women's clothes, Klansmen were dressing as folk vigilantes as much as dressing as women. Dressing


like a woman at once performatively restored a Klansman’s male identity through absurd contrast and projected the wild lawlessness of mumming vigilantism.\textsuperscript{30}

To understand why Klansmen might have craved savage qualities, it is useful to turn to Gail Bederman’s description of the rise of “masculinity,” which she situates somewhat later. Bederman has argued that Progressive Era white men strove both to show their fitness to compete with “lesser races” in a brutal Darwinian struggle and to prove through their refinement that they represented the highest pinnacle of civilization. They attempted simultaneously to claim their lowest and highest impulses: to be fully muscular, physical, and passionate yet also fully controlled and polite. Like blackface performers, Klansmen experienced their costume as a license to indulge in otherwise inappropriate sexual and violent behavior. A crucial meaning of blackface (like the meaning of dressing like beasts, immigrants, or, presumably, the damned) was that the masked person was not civilized. Indeed, costumed Klansmen repeatedly and vociferously rejected the role of that paragon of civilization, the gentleman. When the freedman Elias Thomson addressed his South Carolina attackers (clad in fake teeth, speckled horns, and calico masks) as gentlemen, they demurred: “Do we look like gentlemen?” Another South Carolina Klansman responded similarly, “Don’t you call me any gentleman; we are just from hell-fire; we haven’t been in this country since Manassas.”\textsuperscript{31}

If their costumes inverted their white male identities, their dress combined with their violent performance mocked the code of honorable, gentlemanly violence that was so much a part of Civil War–era culture. Even while some young white southern men defiantly attempted to continue the antebellum tradition of the “tournament,” with its costuming and ritual surrounding the honorable contest between equals, Klansmen were rejecting an honor culture. It is noteworthy that when Klansmen constructed their costumes, performances, and written texts, they only infrequently invoked the notions of honor and the medieval iconography popular in the antebellum South. There was remarkably little medieval allusion in Klan performance or Klan self-presentation on or off the witness stand. Even on those few significant occasions when Klansmen appropriated medieval imagery, they did so in unusual ways. The most medieval-looking Klan artifact this writer has encountered, a banner identified as an 1867 Tennessee Klan flag, bears the Latin motto, “Quod Semper, Quod Ubique, Quod Ab Omnibus” (What [has been believed] always, everywhere, among all people), St. Vincent’s of Lérins’s characterization of true Catholic doctrine—a curious choice for overwhelmingly Protestant Klansmen. (See figure 4.) The popular Klan costume of flowing robes with the symbols sewn onto them evoked the antebellum sense of the medieval, but the symbols were often interspersed with polka dots and fake facial hair. The Klansmen’s bizarre and self-consciously degraded self-presentation were bitter mockeries of honor culture. Southern honor had proved insufficient against cowardly northern ruthlessness backed up by the brute force of numbers; in the Klan disenchanted southerners left the field of honor for a different sort of combat.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Flynn, “Ancient Pedigree of Violent Repression,” 192; Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 149–50.


\textsuperscript{32} For a counterargument, giving examples of honor language and evocations of Sir Walter Scott, see Nelson, Iron Confederacies, 109–11. Medieval imagery would come to be associated with the Klan mainly in retrospect, in
Klan violence would be neither honorable nor gentlemanly. Klansmen, deprived of their white manhood by their military humiliation and the political and financial embarrassments that followed, would appropriate the identities and techniques of those who were not masters. The image of the Klansman who had abandoned the pretense of restraint inherent in gentlemanly honor and embraced the identity of the disempowered was threatening and destabilizing not only to Klan victims but also potentially to the broader society. The literary critic W. T. Lhamon has provocatively suggested that minstrelsy was a way of imagining and performatively “enacting” miscegenation. The tension of minstrelsy, according to Lhamon, was not so much the incongruity of the white man representing himself as a black man or a woman as it was the presence of a figure at once black and white, male and female. Carnivals similarly revolved around figures that obscured rather than strengthened cultural binaries: not only blackfaced whites and burly men in elegant gowns, but adult children, henpecked husbands, voting women, sagacious animals, the missing link, black legislators, and bestial gentlemen.33

Figure 4. Photograph of a Tennessee Ku Klux Klan rider on horseback and in full regalia, holding a flag with the Latin motto “Quod Semper, Quod Ubique, Quod Ab Omnibus,” c. 1868. Courtesy Tennessee State Museum Collection, Nashville.


But even as they featured these disturbing "amalgamations," minstrel and carnival performances were framed to relieve their audiences of certain anxieties. The carnival procession's motley assortment of apes, apelike blacks, clowns, and wild men nevertheless always basically conformed to their route and marching order. Minstrelsy's "Ethiopians," particularly end men, appeared barely civilized enough to sit in their chairs. They gave their interlocutor, the straight man, a tough time, but they ultimately managed to play their bones and tambourines in harmony with one another. Lhamon has aptly described minstrelsy as a "struggle over the seating of chaotic energy." The tension between white civilization and black chaos was staged as a perpetual struggle, with the audience invited to identify with the latter. Yet the show always proceeded more or less as planned and delivered to the audience more or less what they had paid for: the interlocutor won every time. Both genres, carnival and minstrel show, were dramas of controlled savagery. One Louisiana newspaper editor reflected the nature of the vicarious pleasure many white southerners experienced in watching these pageants of contained brutality when he drew a lengthy analogy between freed people and the circus animals controlled by "white showmen." Like the Victorian-era British game that invited children to paste bars over the cages of exotic beasts, the minstrel and carnivalesque reassured whites that while the threatening black, Indian, or beast had not been truly civilized, he had been captured; white showmen could safely mobilize savagery for their own purposes.34

This was a powerful analogy for Klansmen on multiple levels. Obviously, they wanted to maintain a South in which the white man orchestrated the black man's movements. Equally, on an individual level, they wanted to believe that the civilized could contain and perform brutality, savagery, or blackness without becoming brutish, savage, or black. This desire to appropriate qualities associated with blackness may explain the odd physical intimacy between attackers and victims that sometimes puzzled black witnesses. The wife of one murdered freedman had at first believed that his masked assailants were black because of their close physical contact with him during the attack. "I thought no white people would pick up such a man and tote him—that they would not lower themselves low enough, as they would say, to pick up a darkey." As they ruthlessly enforced social, economic, and political barriers between black and white, Klansmen, whether they were undressing, grabbing, whipping, torturing, raping, or lynching, were constantly encountering black flesh. Through their theatrics, Klansmen consumed and enacted savagery, while reassuring themselves and others that it would function as a tool of order and civilization. Klansmen's performance mobilized carnivalesque forms to construct an image of a civilized body capable of harnessing and containing savagery within a reconstructed social world.35

Klansmen's construction of their costumes and performance within the carnivalesque tradition was itself a form of cultural miscegenation. Although carnival has early modern European roots, most scholars have maintained that carnival traditions in the southern United States were more immediately influenced by African American and Caribbean culture. Both carnival and minstrelsy are today used as prime examples of Afro-European hybridization. One can see some striking examples of this cultural taking in Klan perfor-


35 *Testimony of Eliza Lyon in Joint Select Committee, Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, part 9: Alabama*, vol. II, Oct. 24, 1871, p. 1263.
mance. Some Klansmen’s predilection for bull horns and animal skins, for homemade or unusual instruments, or for a disorderly pastiche of design elements, for instance, strongly evoke not so much contemporary Mardi Gras celebrations as the early national and antebellum Jon Konnering festivities popular in Jamaica and the Carolinas.36

As Klansmen asserted a new white manhood made more resilient through savagery, reports of their performance permeated southern culture. Not only was newspaper coverage of the Klan heavy, the circuses, minstrel shows, and carnivals from which Klansmen had drawn reincorporated the Klan into their acts. The reabsorption is most dramatically demonstrated in the Mardi Gras celebrations that spread from Mobile and New Orleans to numerous southern cities (including Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee; Lexington, Kentucky; Galveston and Dallas, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; and even St. Louis, Missouri) between 1870 and 1876. Paradegoers understood Mardi Gras as a particularly southern movement. As the New Orleans Picayune put it, “Mardi-Gras is a festival with which our brethren of more Northern climes have little or no acquaintance.” (See figure 5.)37

The New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration was the largest in the South. Students of carnival in New Orleans, most notably Joseph Roach, have explored the use of Mardi Gras by the city’s rising white, English-speaking elite to establish its political and cultural authority in the Reconstruction years. As Roach pointed out, connections between Mardi Gras and clandestine anti-Reconstruction violence went far beyond the merely symbolic;

there was a substantial overlap between membership in New Orleans krewes and in the White League, which in 1874 organized a nearly successful coup against Louisiana’s Reconstruction government. But the carnivalesque performance of Mardi Gras was generative as well as destructive; even as it served as a rehearsal for political rebellion against the law imposed by Republicans, “white carnivalesque lawlessness,” as Roach put it, “evolved incrementally into law.” Elites channeled the chaos of carnival into particular times and spaces and controlled (indeed, comprised) the membership of its key institutions. With the collapse of Reconstruction, krewes members themselves became the lawmakers.38

Just as the carnivalesque was insinuating itself into city hall, so the Klan was infiltrating the Crescent City’s carnival celebrations. At the 1872 Krewe of Comus parade, “Ku-Klux-es” intermingled with “Chinamen, Japanese, brigands, clowns, monkeys, and Knights of McGraw.” An 1874 Rex procession composed of Earl Marshal Warwick and “his staff—known as the kkk”—marched from one ceremonial meeting to the next, finally presenting the gift of “a butt of Malmsey” to their “poet laureate” in payment for her services. It is notable that only here, with the Klan’s appropriation by (would-be) governing elites, is the movement systematically associated with medieval imagery and organization. The legitimation of New Orleans carnival generally paralleled the incorporation of the Klan and its ideas into mainstream culture.39

The legitimation of carnival and its relationship to the Klan is relevant far beyond New Orleans, though. Klansmen were a staple of carnival throughout the South. Jackson, Mississippi’s 1871 carnival parade, held during the Christmas holidays, included a comic militia called Alcorn’s Picked Cavalry and wearing the “most unique and fantastic dress and costumes that can be conceived, riding the poorest and most broken down steeds (horses and mules) that could be gathered.” Among their numbers were found not only “penitentiary birds,” clowns, “noble warriors from Africa’s sunny land, and Counts from Venice; lager beer drinkers from Amsterdam, and a full grown orang outang from the Islands of the Pacific,” but also “Ku-Klux who had quit their evil ways.” In 1872 a Mobile newspaper anxiously encouraging people to stay in Mobile rather than journey to New Orleans for Mardi Gras anticipated that the “K. K.s. would march.40

The proliferation of Mardi Gras was roughly simultaneous with the Klan’s decline and sheds some light on why the Klan had almost disappeared by 1872. The causes and timing of the decline of the Klan movement, like its rise, varied dramatically from one region to another. In Virginia the Klan existed for only a few months in 1868; in Tennessee the Klan had collapsed by 1869; in Alabama’s western black belt the Klan did so by early 1870. Historians of the Klan have developed several theories about how each of those regional groups came to an end. Some have emphasized that as conservatives acquired more legitimate power, their need and tolerance for chaotic masked violence decreased. Christopher Waldrep makes almost the opposite argument. Pointing out that antiblack collective violence assumed the shape of communal lynching in the years following the Klan’s

39 Gill, Lords of Misrule, 98; Perry Young, The Mistick Krewe: Chronicles of Comus and His Kin (New Orleans, 1931), 129.
decline, he suggests that as antiblack violence achieved the community mandate that had always eluded the Klan, furtive masked tactics gave way to open lynch mobs. Many scholars have pointed to the impact of actions taken by individual states and, ultimately, by the federal government, most notably the anti-Klan federal enforcement legislation passed in 1870 and 1871 and the aggressive federal prosecution in South Carolina in late 1871. None of those explanations, however, take into account the expressive function of Klan violence. If the Klan was doing crucial discursive work, what happened to that work when the Klan so quickly disappeared?

The Klan observer Albion Tourgée, in his historical novel, A Fool’s Errand, suggested that at the height of its power, the Klan reached the point where “its decrees were far more potent, and its power more dreaded, than that of the visible commonwealths which it either dominated or terrorized.” The ghostly, grotesque Klansman had become more real than the power structure he challenged. But by its very nature, the Klan’s carnivalesque power, premised on Klansmen’s apparent lack of conventional power, was self-destroying. In her work on the trickster figure in folk culture, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams asked, “what happens when the fool becomes central to the action” while retaining his chaotic power? As conservative southern whites, with the Klan’s aid, retook legitimate means of power, the traditional carnivalesque weapons of the weak no longer made sense to those returning to positions of dominance. Klan costumes and performance, however, did not go away with the decline of Klan violence. Rather, the idea of the Klan and cultural representations of the Klan remained so much a part of American culture that they would still be available to fuel a revival half a century later. The Klan was so deeply rooted in cultural representation, and its status outside that representation so deliberately ambiguous, that it was natural for it to retreat into the realm of the tall tale and the myth that had given it birth.

It is almost possible to observe the Klan’s retreat into its popular cultural home in the major carnival celebration closest to the Klan’s original home, in Memphis. The Memphis elite who scrounged together sufficient resources to stage a Mardi Gras parade in 1872 included those who in leaner years had played key leadership roles in the regional Klan. Surrounding the newspaper coverage of the parades were accounts of the success of the by-then conservative white government in ensuring order during the festivities. Conservative whites could view this unambiguous recapture of the public square with pride. The parade was sponsored by and covered at length in both of Memphis’s major conservative papers. According to the Memphis Daily Avalanche, the “Ku Klux” were “well represented” in the parade, wearing “black, with high hats of a conical shape. Each hat bore the skull and cross bones and the terrible letters K. K. K. in white.” Some of them carried ropes, and as they paraded though the streets, “It was a favorite bit of pleasantry to lasso a negro. No violence was offered but the contortions and grimaces of the captives were highly amusing.”

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The *Memphis Appeal*’s coverage describes a “cavaliers of all nations” section of the parade, which included a “ku-klux” contingent. In addition to this, the Klan had its own float, on which were representatives of the Klan from all the states of the South. All the terrible scenes alleged to have been enacted for years past in the Carolinas were presented. The ku-klux appeared in full regalia. One of their number personated a living ace of spades, the veritable butt-end of midnight, the impersonation of loyal leaguism. The negro was executed according to all the forms made familiar by Nast’s pictures, and by the trustworthy correspondents of the Cincinnati press.

There was something valedictory about the “lynching float” featuring Klansmen (likely actual, albeit retired, terrorists) pretending to torture someone disguised as a freedman in various terrible ways while insisting that the events they depicted were merely the product of a fevered northern imagination. Freed people had been accommodating enough to turn out in great numbers for this spectacle of southern white male dominance produced, at great expense, by conservative business and political leaders. It is hard to imagine a more perfect moment of hegemonic coercion. Yet some Klan foot soldiers interrupted the spectacle with actual physical violence, lassoing hapless audience members. Was this the intention of the parade’s sponsors? The *Avalanche* clearly was amused by the spectacle and chose to include it in its parade description. Yet it downplayed it, remarkably insisting that “no violence was offered” to the contorted, grimacing victims. Even describing the lassoing within a seamless and orderly account of the parade rather than ignoring it or segregating it in its own article as an incident normalized it. If there was a wild man in the procession, the narrative suggested, he was simply performing violence within the safe confines of the orderly parade.

But the real significance of the parade was that it occurred at all. Southern Democrats’ political resurgence, which many have pointed to as precipitating the Klan’s decline, had a cultural parallel. Even as it became clear that there was little threat of interference from the North or its Republican allies, some conservative southerners were finally managing to gather the organizational energy and capital to launch their own cultural institutions. The proliferation of Mardi Gras celebrations was a prime example. Just as the Klan was politically attractive to conservative white southerners because more efficient institutional violence was unavailable to them, so it was culturally attractive because it provided a space for the staging of a collective white southern cultural identity at a time when white conservative southerners lacked more conventional means to stage it. Once southern elites could gather huge crowds to witness large, splasy Mardi Gras celebrations teeming with representations of race, gender, violence, and antinorthern sentiment and could describe them in detail and without fear of reprisal in their own increasingly viable newspapers, the actual Klan was of much less use to them. The Klan would dissolve easily back into the cultural realm, where it would have and continues to have an uncanny and undeniable resonance.

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