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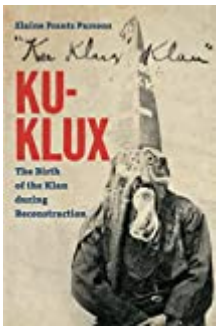

Elaine Frantz Parsons. *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 400 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-2542-3.

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Rethinking the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan

In this complex and important monograph, historian Elaine Frantz Parsons presents the first major treatment of the post-Civil War Ku Klux Klan since the publication of *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* by Allen Trelease in 1971. With the collapse of slavery and the Confederacy at the end of the war, she writes, white southerners became concerned that they no longer possessed the tools to control the freed people. Consequently, they pressed a vigorous campaign to do so through economic power (rooted in land ownership) and through the passage of legislation aimed at maintaining white dominance over blacks.

Central to their campaign was their use of racist violence, particularly mob violence. With extreme frequency, white mobs attacked random blacks in bloody race riots or targeted them for nighttime whippings, beatings, and hangings. Because they did so in clandestine ways to avoid capture or punishment by federal authorities, they undermined their ultimate objective. âAll of these forms of violence, however, shared a significant shortcoming as a means of reasserting white racial dominance,â she argues. They âneutered their coordinated political force. The many thousands of individual white-on-black attacks, the several bloody riots, the hundreds of [vigilante] groups failed to add up to a coherent whole. Rather than representing the voice of a defeated-but-not-prostrate white South–an emergent southern white leadership–they conveyed a message of inchoate southern white furyâ (p. 6).

âThe Ku-Klux Klan would solve this problem,â she contends. It allowed white southerners not only to continue their clandestine violence and avoid detection by Union officials, but also to reimagine and present themselves in small, scattered cities, towns, and hamlets across the region âas part of a single pan-southern resistance movement.â Rather than striking only at a local level to terrorize black Republicans and successful black farmers, the Klan allowed for southern whites to present themselves plausibly as part of an invisible coalition–an Invisible Empire–standing together against the coordinated assaults against white domination by white carpetbaggers and scalawags and striving black southerners alike.

Between 1866 and 1871, white guerrillas calling themselves âKu-Kluxâ became what Parsons calls âthe most widely proliferated and deadly domestic terrorist movement in the history of the United States,â killing, raping, dispossessing, and expelling thousands of African American men, women, and children (p. 6).

Drawing on cultural history, Parsons makes her most important contribution through her shift in focus from the Klan as an organization to the Klan as an âideaâ (p. 9). Certainly, she observes, the Ku Klux Klan was a *real thing*–âembodied,â as its victims learned through incessant floggings and other acts of abuse; yet, it was also a âdisembodiedâ thing, an âabstract idea â¦ as it was represented in public discourse,â and particularly in newspapers. âLike the embodied Klan, the disembodied Klan was produced by thousands of individuals who spoke, wrote, drew, and performed their distinct idea of the nature and meaning of collectiveâ violence and, together, they âcreated a composite notion of the Klan that defined the white southern men committing the violence as organized, powerful, mysterious, bizarre, and almost undetectable, their victims as passive and helplessâ (p. 10). In the national mass-media conversation between white southern vigilantes, black southerners, and white northerners, the Ku Klux Klan became a narrative, a trope, that each used for their own purposes to shape the debate over black freedom and Reconstruction policy. âThe Klan was part of a modernizing process through which rural white southerners learned, appropriated, and inhabited cultural forms from the urban North,â she argues. Klansmen did, as many scholars have long assumed, draw upon a southern code of honor âbut they also fiercely parodied it, becoming deliberately comic versions of noble knights, dressed in ridiculously exaggerated faux finery and attacking foes for whom they had only the deepest contempt. They frequently appropriated tropes, language, costume, and even technology from northern urban cultural forms such as the minstrel stage and even from the brand new burlesque performance styleâ (p. 12). Parsons also addresses how black victims used–or were used in–the Ku-Klux discourse during their testimony before Congress over the racist violence sweeping across the South, and how their white interlocutors locked them into roles as passive victims through the questions asked and the testimony sought. She also interrogates how white northerners used Ku-Klux discourse to debate the shifting course of Reconstruction. Specifically, she argues that âthe idea of the Klan also served the purpose of sectional reconciliation and the construction of a shared set of political understandings between northerners and southern Democratic whitesâ (p. 12).

Although appropriately respectful of the contributions made by Trelease in *White Terror*, Parsons sets about dismantling certain of the assumptions that guided his scholarship–and therefore that of subsequent historians. âTrelease wrote before the rise of cultural history,â she writes, a fact revealed âabove all, in his stiff relationship to his often ambiguous primary sourcesâ (p. 16). In addition to contemporary documents, for example, he introduced some sources written long after the fact–and for particularly political purposes. Consequently, he tended to credit the claims of a later generation of supporters who characterized the Klan as an âorganization,â claims which, Parsons suggests, do not comport with the ground-level reality of the 1860s when the Klan existed primarily through discourse animated through acts of stylized violence that seemed to prove such claims. âMy bookâs approach to evaluating evidence of organization is a mirror image of Treleaseâs,â she asserts (p. 18). âThis book reads accounts of Klan organization and capacity through a lens of suspicionâ (p. 19). She also asserts that if the Klan had been well organized, it would have left behind far more archival evidence of its existence. âThe suggestion that local den chiefs or secretaries, together with individual members who had received correspondence, reliably and comprehensively destroyed them in 1871 to avoid prosecution and that almost none concealed them only to bring them out again in the Ku-Klux-loving period a few decades later suggests a pervasive internalized bureaucratic discipline that would be surprising to see anywhere, but particularly in the postwar Southâ (p. 19).

Ku-Klux is a significant contribution in large part because it turns so much of the conventional wisdom about the Klan on its head. Whether or not subsequent scholars support all of its contentions, the book certainly alters the discussion in the future. It also uses an impressive array of sources, including very insightful readings of contemporary local, regional, and national newspapers; testimony from the Congressional Record; material culture analysis of contemporary Ku-Klux robes and attire; and a wide variety of reverential accounts of the early Klan produced during the second phase of the organization in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Particularly fascinating for this reader are Parsonsâ attention to the adoption by the Klan of northern urban entertainment tropes and her emphasis on the âcarnivalesqueâ in analyzing their violence, including the use of almost clown-like gowns and fright-inducing masks,

the organization of parades, and even the performance of terrifying stunts. âIn the course of a particularly sadistic attack, Ku-Klux staged their own circus, first forcing their black victims to act like horses, then performing for them, âpukingâ fire out of their mouthsââ (p. 86). The Klansmen were selective in their appropriation of popular culture, she writes later. âIn choreographing their attacks, for instance, they drew not from prize-fighting or domestic fiction but from minstrelsy, the carnivalesque, and related genres. Not coincidentally, these types of performance were deeply implicated in the work of racial and gender redefinition. Drawing from them enabled Ku-Klux to mobilize the cultural messages they had already refined over many years of performanceâ (p. 87). In other instances, Klansmen forced their black victims to play out minstrel roles as part of their degradation. On numerous occasions, she finds, Klansmen âdemanded that victims perform a minstrelesque role. For instance, Ku-Klux attackers frequently forced victims to feign gullibility. One important argument against citizenship for freedmen was that they were too gullible, too easily manipulatedâ (p. 101).

In the opinion of the reviewer, the conclusion of this book provided Parsons with an opportunity to pull together the disparate threads of her expansive and complex argument and to consider their implications for the larger historiography. Instead, it is largely summative. Aside from this mild grievance, *Ku-Klux* should be essential reading for scholars focusing on the Civil War, Reconstruction, or racist violence in America.