



CROSSING A BOUNDARY

At a racist gathering on the West Coast, Frank, a skinhead from Texas, sidled up to me to share his disgust at an event so mild it was “something you could see on the family channel.” At his side, Liz echoed his sentiment, complaining that she felt trapped in a “Baptist church social.” We chatted some more. Frank boasted that this was nothing like he expected. He made the long trip to “get his juices going,” not to be part of something concocted by “wimps.” Liz agreed, pointing with disdain to a group of women hauling boxes of hamburger buns over to a large grill.

I found their reactions baffling. To me, the scene was horrifying, anything but mundane. Frank’s arms were covered with swastika tattoos. On his head was a baseball cap with a comic-like depiction of an African American man being lynched. Liz’s black skirt, hose, and boots accentuated the small Klan cross embroidered on her white tailored shirt. The rituals of historical hatred being enacted in front of us seemed far from disappointingly “tame,” as Frank and Liz’s complaints suggested. A cross was doused with gasoline and set ablaze. People spoke casually of the need to “get rid” of African Americans, immigrants, Jews, gay men and lesbians, and Asian Americans, or exchanged historical trivia purporting to expose the Holocaust as a Zionist hoax.

Later that night, the rally’s leaders called everyone into headquarters to don robes and hoods. It was then that I regretted not taking notice of people’s shoes earlier in the day. After our initial conversation, I de-

cided that Frank and Liz were less scary than the young skinheads screaming about white power, and I tried to stick close to them. But amid all the covered faces and identical Klan garb, I couldn't tell one person from another. I was frightened. Everything was chillingly out of the ordinary.

Only much later did I understand how Frank and Liz could compare a racist rally to a community social gathering. It was years before I could bring myself to read my notes on this rally, written on sheets of paper to which faint scents of smoke and kerosene still seemed to cling. Yet with time and psychic distance from my encounters with Frank, Liz, and others like them, I came to see that aspects of racist gatherings do mirror church socials or neighborhood picnics, albeit in a distorted, perverse fashion. I remember a card table piled high with racist children's books, bumper stickers, and index cards of "white power recipes"; sessions on self-help for disgruntled or substance-addicted members; hymns sung as background to speeches about strengthening the "racialist movement"; and the pancake breakfast and "social hour."

It was with an eerie sense of the familiar colliding with the bizarre that I crossed the boundary that divides the racist underground from the mainstream to write this book. Much about racist groups appears disturbingly ordinary, especially their evocation of community, family, and social ties. One woman gushed that a Ku Klux Klan rally "was a blast. I had fun. And it was just like a big family get-together. We played volleyball. And you had your little church thing on Sunday. For the longest time I thought I would be bored. But I wasn't bored at all." Another woman described a Nazi compound as being "almost set up like a summer camp. There was just a big hall, like a bunkhouse-type thing where you could eat. And then there was the chapel. Only people who lived there and did security got actual places to sleep. Independent women had houses and cabins to sleep in. You pitched tents. The rules were very strict: no drinking, no smoking, no this and that. When the women came together it was real fun. It was like a giant family reunion. It really didn't seem harmful or threatening at all, other than the men [who] would take care of guarding the guests."

Some of the ideas voiced by racist groups can seem unremarkable, as evident in the scary similarity to mainstream right-wing stands on such issues as gun control. Still, the watershed that divides racist activism from the rest of society is striking. The beliefs of racist groups are not just extreme variants of mainstream racism, xenophobia, or anti-Semitism. Rather, their conspiratorial logic and zeal for activism sepa-

rate members of racist groups from those on “the outside,” as racist activists call it. By combining the aberrant with the ordinary, the peculiar with the prosaic, modern racist groups gain strength. To design effective strategies to combat racist groups, we must understand this combination.

Intense, activist racism typically does not arise on its own; it is learned in racist *groups*. These groups promote ideas radically different from the racist attitudes held by many whites. They teach a complex and contradictory mix of hatred for enemies, belief in conspiracies, and allegiance to an imaginary unified race of “Aryans.” Women are the newest recruiting targets of racist groups, and they provide a key to these groups’ campaign for racial supremacy. “We are very picky when we come to girls,” one woman told me. “We don’t like sluts. The girls must know their place but take care of business and contribute a lot too. Our girls have a clean slate. Nobody could disrespect us if they tried. We want girls [who are] well educated, the whole bit. And tough as shit.”

The groups and networks that espouse and promote openly racist and anti-Semitic, and often xenophobic and homophobic, views and actions are what I call “organized racism.”¹ Organized racism is more than the aggregation of individual racist sentiments. It is a social milieu in which venomous ideas—about African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, gay men and lesbians, and others—take shape. Through networks of groups and activists, it channels personal sentiments of hatred into collective racist acts. Organized racism is different from the racism widespread in mainstream white society: it is more focused, self-conscious, and targeted at specific strategic goals.

Today, organized racism in the United States is rife with paradox. While racist groups are becoming more visible, their messages of racial hatred and white supremacy find little support in the rest of society. Racist groups increasingly have anti-Semitism as their core belief, though anti-Semitic attitudes in America as a whole are at their lowest ebb. Despite proclaiming bizarre and illogical views of race and religion, racist groups attract not only those who are ignorant, irrational, socially isolated, or marginal, but also intelligent, educated people, those with resources and social connections, those with something to lose. Organized racists trade in a currency of racist stereotyping little changed from the views of the nineteenth-century Klan and of anti-Semitism recycled from World War II-era Nazi propaganda, yet they recruit successfully among the young who have little or no knowledge of that history. They seize on racist rituals from the past to foment rage about the conditions

of the present, appealing to teenagers whose lives are scarred by familial abuse and terror as well as the sons and daughters of stable and loving families, the offspring of privilege and the beneficiaries of parental attention. Racist groups project a sense of hypermasculinity in their militaristic swagger and tactics of bullying and intimidation,² but they increasingly are able to bring women into their ranks.

When I began my research, I wanted to understand the paradoxes of organized racism. Were, I wondered, the increased numbers of women changing the masculine cast of racist groups? Why, I asked myself, did racist activists continue to see Jews, African Americans, and others as enemies, and why did they regard violence as a racial solution? Convinced that we can defeat organized racism only if we know how it recruits and retains its members, I also wanted to learn why people join organized racism and how being in racist groups affects them. My approach makes four basic assumptions:

- ***The members of racist groups are as important as the leaders.*** When we look at the members of racist groups we find a surprising diversity—a point often missed because of the tendency to emphasize their similarities. The sociologist Norman Elias observed that individuals can be larger than groups.³ Every person has multiple identities and social positions, some of which tug in different directions, such as mother, worker, daughter, citizen, and friend. Voluntary social groups, in contrast, cluster people according to what they have in common, as do churches, parenting groups, or labor unions. If we focus on the homogeneity of a group, we can lose sight of the more complex nature of the people in it. Concentrating on the organized facade of racism—the structure, leadership, and propaganda issued by racist groups—creates a strong impression of uniformity, which may be undermined by an examination of *individual* racists. Only by paying attention to the members can we assess the varied backgrounds, worldviews, identities, and racial loyalties that are found in racist groups.

Racists may not be who we expect. One woman told me, “I was a hostess at a restaurant. . . . Someone gave me a tip one time as they were leaving because they had requested a special booth near the fireplace. And I got it for them. And they gave me a tip as they were leaving. And it was a five-dollar bill folded in half. And inside the five-dollar bill was a card that said, ‘You have been patronized by the KKK.’ You can’t tell. It’s real surprising.”

The usual focus on a few prominent leaders gives the mistaken im-

pression that organized racism is made up of forceful leaders and compliant followers. The handful of men who proclaim themselves leaders or spokespersons for organized racism—including David Duke of the National Association for the Advancement of White People, William Pierce of the National Alliance, Robert Miles of Aryan Nations, and Louis Beam of the Ku Klux Klan—make headlines, but most men and virtually all women occupy hidden niches in racist groups. Paying attention to members enables us to explore when members exercise power over their leaders by granting or withdrawing their support as well as how leaders secure loyalty from recalcitrant followers.

In addition, focusing on members helps us avoid the common but fallacious tendency to use macro (societal) patterns to understand micro (individual) behavior. We cannot assume that the same factors that explain mass social movements also supply the motivations of all those who join the movement. For example, Germany's interwar economic crisis fostered the Nazis' rise to power. But it does not follow that every member joined the Nazi Party for economic reasons. Similarly, to explain individual recruitment into the far right today we must look at the actual motives and experiences of its participants rather than make sweeping generalizations about social trends.

- **People receive racist messages differently.** It is not possible to understand how people are attracted to organized racism simply by reading racist propaganda or listening to the speeches of its leaders. Texts are read in various ways by different readers—sometimes in ways contrary to the author's intentions. Thus, it can be dangerously misleading to presume that we can understand the motives of racist activists by looking at the ideologies of their groups. Nor can we understand racist groups by simply examining their propaganda. Rather, we must consider how members *receive* the cultural, political, and ideological messages projected by racist groups. Although racist groups display great similarity in their ideological messages and stylized pageantry, the members to whom these are directed are heterogeneous and their reception of these messages is uneven.⁴ As we will see, racist individuals actively mold the messages of racist groups to fit their own lives and agendas.
- **Organized racism is a social movement.** Racist activism is more than the sum of racist people or racist groups. It is a *social movement*, a “family” of overlapping groups organized to spread racist and anti-Semitic ideas and terrorist tactics.⁵ And as a social movement, whatever its goals,

organized racism shares features with other, more benign, social movements. For example, it is shaped by the larger political environment in which it operates. Today's racist movement is politically and socially marginal, scorned in almost every sphere of mainstream society, from the media, education, and organized religion to electoral politics. Given such sentiments, it is not surprising that racist activists view the outside world as conspiring against them, that they embrace terrorism over electoral politics, and that they favor secretive and hierarchical groups. As one skinhead woman indicated, as a member of the racist movement, you have to "prepare yourself for war constantly. Don't speak if you can't defend yourself in every way. Prepare by knowing, first of all, then work on guns and amass food and water supplies, first aid kits, medication, clothing, blankets. Try to become self-sufficient."

In addition to being affected by the larger political milieu, organized racism has other features oddly similar to those of what scholars term "new social movements" (NSMs), such as the environmental, gay/lesbian rights, and feminist movements. Like these new social movements, organized racism draws members from diverse backgrounds, pays attention to issues of individual identity and daily life as well as abstract policies, and incorporates personal relationships into collective action. Also, like progressive NSMs, today's racist groups occupy what the social movement scholar Alberto Melucci describes as the "intermediate space of social life where individual needs and the pressures of political innovations mesh," and in a perverse way they expand civil society—although certainly not, as is characteristic of NSMs, in the direction of democratization.⁶

- **Organized racism is emotional but not irrational.** Emotions play an important role in all social movements,⁷ including racist movements. Collective racist agendas depend on emotional relationships among activists to motivate and sustain activism, including intricate dynamics of intimacy, betrayal, dissension, grief, exhilaration, conflict, satisfaction, intimidation, coercion, confusion, and disillusionment.⁸ Emotions can overlap in complex ways. For example, loyalty may stem in part from fear, as one skinhead suggested when she declared, "You have to prove yourself and your loyalty. They do, like, a background-type check on you, you know. It's amazing, you know. They know people at the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles] and they can find out where you live." But loyalty may also be nourished by pride and a sense of accomplishment. One woman explained, "I just kind of got volunteered into a lot

of things that I didn't really expect to, but when I got up and spoke at rallies and stuff, people really listened to what I had to say. And it's, like, that I owe them. It is a responsibility."

That racist groups have an emotional dimension does not mean that they or their adherents are irrational.⁹ As the historian of Italian fascism Mabel Berezin argues, "Emotion is nonrational, but it is not irrational."¹⁰ Certainly, many racist activists exhibit paranoia, conspiratorial thinking, social isolation, obsessive xenophobia, and emotional attenuation. But, like racist identities themselves, these may be *outcomes* rather than *predictors* of joining a racist group.

FOCUSING ON RACIST WOMEN

To understand organized racism from the inside—from the experiences and beliefs of its members—I decided that I needed to talk with racist activists. I chose to interview women for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, I found that I could get access to women racists and develop some measure of rapport with them. More substantively, I wanted to study women racists because we know so little about them. Since 1980 women have been actively recruited by U.S. racist groups both because racist leaders see them as unlikely to have criminal records that would draw the attention of police and because they help augment membership rolls. Today, women are estimated to constitute nearly 50 percent of new members in some racist groups, leading some antiracist monitoring groups to claim that they are the "fastest growing part of the racist movement."¹¹ Yet this new group of racist activists has been ignored, as researchers have tended to view racism as male-dominated and racist women as more interested in domestic and personal concerns than in its politics.¹²

Eventually, I persuaded thirty-four women from a variety of racist and anti-Semitic groups across the country to talk to me at length about themselves and their racist activities. Fourteen women were in neo-Nazi but not skinhead groups, six were members of Ku Klux Klans, eight were white power skinheads, and six were in Christian Identity or related groups (see appendix 1 for more on the distinctions among these groups). What they told me shatters many common ideas about what racist activists are like.

Among the women I interviewed there was no single racist *type*. The media depict unkempt, surly women in faded T-shirts, but the reality is

different. One of my first interviews was with Mary, a vivacious Klanswoman who met me at her door with a big smile and ushered me into her large, inviting kitchen. Her blond hair was pulled back into a long ponytail and tied with a large green bow. She wore dangling gold hoop earrings, blue jeans, a modest flowered blouse, and no visible tattoos or other racist insignia. Her only other jewelry was a simple gold-colored necklace. Perhaps sensing my surprise at her unremarkable appearance, she joked that her suburban appearance was her “undercover uniform.”

Trudy, an elderly Nazi activist I interviewed somewhat later, lived in a one-story, almost shabby ranch house on a lower-middle-class street in a small town in the Midwest. Her house was furnished plainly. Moving cautiously with the aid of a walker, she brought out tea and cookies prepared for my visit. Meeting her reminded me of the phrase “old country women,” which I had once heard from a southern policeman characterizing the rural Klanswomen in his area.

I also interviewed Roseanne, a small, lively white supremacist woman with short-cropped black hair who wore a flowered sundress. We got together in the living room of her government-subsidized apartment in a large, racially mixed housing complex. Her apartment was very small and nearly barren of furniture—making her expensive computer and fax and copy machines dedicated to her work “for the movement” stand out all the more.

My encounters with skinhead women were more guarded, although some were quite animated and articulate. Not one invited me into her home—all I got was a quick glance when I picked her up for an interview in some other location. Most seemed to live at or barely above the level of squatters, in dirty, poorly equipped spaces that were nearly uninhabitable. Their appearance varied. Molly sported five ear piercings that held silver hoops and a silver female sign, an attractive and professionally cut punk hairstyle, fine features, and intense eyes. Others were ghostly figures, with empty eyes and visible scars poorly hidden behind heavy makeup and garish lipstick.

Over a two-year period I spent considerable time with these women, talking to them about their racist commitments and getting them to tell me their life stories (see appendix 2 for details on how the study was conducted). Listening to them describe their backgrounds, I realized that many did not fit common stereotypes about racist women as uneducated, marginal members of society raised in terrible families and lured into racist groups by boyfriends and husbands. Instead, I learned:

- *Most were educated.* Against the idea that racism is the product of ignorance, fourteen of the thirty-four women were in college or held associate or higher degrees. Another fifteen had finished or were currently in high school. Only five had failed to complete high school.

- *Most were not poor.* People generally believe that racism is most intense among poor and lower-working-class people who compete with racial minorities for jobs, housing, and social services.¹³ However, most of the women I interviewed had good jobs. They were occupational therapists, nurses, teachers, engineers, librarians, draftspersons, or phone company representatives. Some were attending college; others were not employed but were married to men with decent jobs. Only about one-third were living in more precarious conditions—as waitresses in pizza parlors, as lay ministers in tiny racist churches, as teachers in racist private schools, or as the wives of men who lacked secure employment.

- *For some, poverty was caused by racist activism.* For almost half of those without good jobs (or married to underemployed men), marginal employment was a *consequence*, not a *cause*, of being active in racist politics. Some women (or their husbands) lost their jobs when employers discovered their racist activities, or when they were caught proselytizing racism to customers or fellow employees. Others decided to work in racist enclaves—for example, as teachers in Christian Identity schools—to escape the nefarious influences of the outside world and to contribute to the racist movement. Despite their fervent hatred for a federal government that racist activists see as the tool of Zionist/Jewish forces, several women admitted that they relied on welfare programs or food stamps to sustain them and their children during rough economic times.

- *Most did not grow up poor.* Most of the parents of these women had decent jobs. Their fathers were laboratory technicians, construction workers, store owners, company executives, salesmen, farmers, repairmen, postal workers, architects, doctors, factory foremen, and inspectors as well as Christian Identity “ministers.” Their mothers were housewives and Christian Identity schoolteachers as well as nurses, teachers, secretaries, social workers, clerks, computer consultants, corporate executives, real estate agents, and bankers.

- *Most were not raised in abusive families.* Writers often suggest that racist activists are the product of disorganized, uncaring, or abusive families.¹⁴ Yet none of the women I interviewed were raised in foster

homes, by relatives, or in institutions. Several grew up in unstable and violent families, ran away from home, or had intense conflicts with parents or stepparents, but it is not clear that such stresses burdened a significantly higher proportion of these women than the population as a whole. In contrast, some women related stories of idyllic family lives, as did the Klanswoman who recalled her “very happy family background [in which] my parents have been married for thirty-two years and all my brothers and sisters and I are very close.” Most described their family backgrounds in more mixed terms, as both nurturing and restrictive. In any case, it is difficult to know how childhood experiences are related to racist activism. The women’s descriptions of their pasts may be distorted by memory or by an effort to show themselves in a particular light in the interview. Moreover, a number of women related stories of strife with parents or siblings that they later admitted resulted from their racial activism; thus cause and effect are not always easy to determine.

• *Not all women followed a man into racism.* Racist women often are seen as compliant followers of the men in their lives. But the women I interviewed described many paths into the racist movement. Several said they and their husbands or boyfriends grew up in the racist movement and followed their family’s political path. Four said that they and their husband or boyfriend joined a racist group at the same time, as a mutual decision. Another four said they joined racist groups by themselves and met their current boyfriend or husband at a racist event. Seven said a boyfriend or husband encouraged them to join a racist group. Others followed different patterns, including one woman who followed her son into the racist movement, several who recruited male intimates into racist activism, and a handful whose husbands or boyfriends refused to become involved in organized racism.

Why were these racist women willing to talk to me? They had a variety of reasons. Some hoped to generate publicity for their groups or themselves—a common motivation for granting interviews to the media. Many saw an opportunity to explain their racial politics to a white outsider, even one decidedly unsympathetic to their arguments. In a racist variant on the religious imperative to “bear witness” to the unconverted,¹⁵ they wanted the outside world to have an accurate (even if negative) account to counter superficial media reports. As one young woman put it, “I don’t know what your political affiliations are, but I trust that you’ll try to be as objective as possible.” Others wished to

support or challenge what they imagined I had been told in earlier interviews with racist comrades or competitors. And, despite their deep antagonism toward authority figures, some young women were flattered to have their opinions solicited by a university professor. They had rarely encountered someone older who talked with them without being patronizing, threatening, or directive.

From the beginning, when I asked women if I could interview them, I made it clear that I did not share the racial convictions of these groups. I explicitly said that my views were quite opposed to theirs, that they should not hope to convert me to their views, but that I would try to depict women racist activists accurately. I revealed my critical stance but made it clear that I had no intent to portray them as crazy and did not plan to turn them over to law enforcement or mental health agencies.¹⁶

I was prepared to elaborate on my disagreements with organized racism in my interviews, but in nearly every case the women cut me short, eager to talk about themselves.¹⁷ Recognizing the extreme marginalization of the racist movement in the American political landscape, these women had no doubt that an ideological gulf divided them from me—it separates their beliefs from nearly all political ideas deemed acceptable in modern public life. They were accustomed to having people disagree with them, and they rarely tried to sway those who openly opposed their opinions. They were interested in me not as a potential convert, but rather as a recorder of their lives and thoughts. Their desire, at once personal and politically evangelical, was that someone outside the small racist groups to which they belong hear and record their words.

Indeed, such eagerness to talk underscores the ethical dilemma of inadvertently providing a platform for racist propaganda.¹⁸ Studies on racist extremists have the power to publicize even as they scrutinize. The problem was brought to the fore as I considered the issue of anonymity for my interviewees. Although the inclusion of more biographical details about the racist women activists I interviewed would be useful, I decided that doing so would unavoidably reveal their identities and thus give further publicity to them and their groups. For this reason, I have used pseudonyms for interviewees and their groups and changed all identifying details, while rendering quotations verbatim.¹⁹ Most people interviewed by scholars desire to remain anonymous, but these women wanted to be known. Some tried to demand that I use their names or the names of their groups. When an older Ku Klux Klan woman thanked me “for writing an article that might inspire others,” however, I was convinced that my decision to disguise identities was correct.

RAPPORT, SEDUCTION, AND FEAR

What is the correct stance for a researcher studying organized racism to take? Reflecting on his studies of the fascist National Front in England, Nigel Fielding noted the lack of guidelines for those who focus on what he termed, with great understatement, “‘unloved’ groups.”²⁰ The feminist scholarly principle of basing interviews on rapport and empathy is helpful for groups that are “conductive, whimsical, or at least unthreatening,”²¹ but it hardly seems appropriate when the groups are hostile or frightening.

Walking a tightrope in my interviews, I kept a balance between maintaining enough distance to make it clear that I rejected their ideas and creating sufficient rapport to encourage women to talk to me.²² A successful interview needs some conversational common ground. Each party needs to feel understood, if not entirely accepted, by the other. These racist women were unlikely to reveal much about themselves if they did not have some trust in me, if I could not manage to express interest in their lives and refrain from repeatedly condemning them.²³

Usually a researcher can establish rapport with interviewees by proffering details of his or her personal life or expressing agreement with their choices and beliefs. Because I was unwilling to do either, I was forced to rely on more indirect and fragile measures. Like those at family gatherings and office parties who strain toward congeniality across known lines of disagreement, I seized on any experiences or values that we shared, no matter how trivial.²⁴ When they expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies, I let them know that I had the same concerns. I commented positively when they talked of their children in parental rather than political terms—for example, when they worried about having enough time to be good mothers—and hoped that my sympathy would lead them to overlook my silence when they discussed such things as the “racial education” they planned for their children. This approach was not always successful. When one woman with a particularly violent reputation told me in the course of our interview about problems she was having with her infant son, I found it difficult not to offer advice; but fearing to open the conversation to questions about me or my life, I kept my expressions of concern vague. She was clearly dissatisfied, and our rapport began to dissolve. In a later phone call, when I asked about her baby, she dismissed my queries, making it plain that the topic was no longer open for discussion.

A researcher can be simultaneously an “insider” and an “outsider”

to the culture of those being studied. As a white person I had access that no nonwhite researcher could enjoy. As a woman, I had a store of shared experiences that could support a stream of conversational banter about bodies, men, food, and clothing in which a male researcher would be unlikely to engage. Certainly, both I and the women I interviewed realized that I was an outsider to the world of organized racism. But even the obvious barriers between us gave me insight into their convoluted racial beliefs. For example, my contradictory status as both a racial outsider (to their politics) and an apparent racial insider (as white) helped me understand their ambivalent descriptions of their racial and racist identities.

Yet a reliance on rapport is problematic when scholars do not share a worldview with those they study. Trying to understand the world through the eyes of someone for whom you have even a little sympathy is one thing, but the prospect of developing empathy for a racist activist whose life is given meaning and purpose by the desire to annihilate you or others like you is a very different matter. And even if it were possible, such empathy would violate the expected boundaries between scholars and intensely “unloved” groups. I am not alone in worrying that the political stigma attached to these groups will sully those who study them.²⁵

There are uncomfortable emotional complexities to this kind of research. Interviewing members of racist groups is dangerous but also intriguing, even offering a voyeuristic thrill. Though I’m embarrassed to admit it, I found meeting racist activists to be exciting as well as horrifying. The ethnographer Barrie Thorne captures this sense of fieldwork as adventure: it consists of “venturing into exciting, taboo, dangerous, perhaps enticing social circumstances; getting the flavor of participation, living out moments of high drama; but in some ultimate way having a cop-out, a built-in escape, a point of outside leverage that full participants lack.”²⁶

Fieldwork with “unloved groups” also poses the problem of seduction. As Antonius Robben, an anthropologist of Argentinean fascism, notes, even when researchers and interviewees begin as wary opponents, scholars can be drawn into “trad[ing] our critical stance as observers for an illusion of congeniality with cultural insiders.”²⁷ Indeed, others who study loathsome political groups cite the pain of discovering that participants in some of history’s most dreadful social movements can be charming and engaging in interviews.²⁸

My time with Linda, a white power skinhead from the West, illus-

trates one instance of emotional seduction. Before our formal interview, our relationship was tense. With every phone call Linda insisted on changing the place and conditions of the interview, demanding ever more evidence that I was not with the police. She repeatedly threatened to bring her boyfriend and a gun to the interview, in violation of our agreement. Each of her demands required more negotiation and gave Linda another opportunity to remind me that she would not hesitate to hurt anyone who betrayed her or her group. Indeed, I had ample reason to take her threats seriously: both Linda and her boyfriend had served prison sentences for assault, selling drugs, and other offenses. I came to the interview frightened and prepared for hostile confrontation. In person, however, Linda confounded my expectations. She was charming, soft-spoken, and concerned for my comfort during the interview. Although quite willing to express appalling attitudes, Linda prefaced many of her statements by apologizing for what I might find offensive. My fear eased, replaced by a seductive, false rapport as Linda set the parameters of our interaction and I responded to her. Off-guard, I pressed Linda less aggressively than the other women to explain contradictions in the chronology and logic of her story. In retrospect, the field notes that I taped immediately after the interview make me uneasy. They show how disarming emotional manipulation can be, even when one is on guard against it:

I found the [negotiation and preparation for the] interview with Linda to be the most emotionally stressful, maybe with the exception of [another] interview during which I was fearing for my life. Actually with Linda and [her boyfriend] there was no indication that they might try to harm me at all. In fact, quite the contrary. I actually was afraid of that before they came because they both have very violent reputations, but in person they were extremely cordial and very friendly, not trying to intimidate me in any way. Perhaps trying to cultivate me.

Researchers often talk informally about the emotional side of doing fieldwork, but it is a subject rarely discussed in print.²⁹ Pondering one's own emotional state may seem narcissistic—yet it also can be analytically revealing. In the early stages of this research, I experienced a great deal of fear. The violent reputations of some of the women I wanted to interview, including the skinhead organizer whose comrades referred to her as “Ms. Icepick,” did little to dispel my concerns. As I got to know some people in the racist world, I became somewhat less afraid. As I

began to see them in more complicated, less stereotyped ways, I no longer worried that every interaction would end in disaster. It also became clear that as a woman in that male-dominated world I was safer because I seemed to pose little threat: male researchers were seen as more personally challenging to male racists and more likely to be covert police operatives.³⁰

But in other respects, I grew more afraid as I became less naive. For one thing, I came to realize that my white skin color would provide me little protection. Many racist activists who have faced criminal charges were turned in by other whites, sometimes even members of their own groups. Moreover, as I discuss later, some racists see race as determined by commitment to white power politics rather than by genetics. I could not assume that those I interviewed would view me either as white or as nonhostile. I could not count on racial immunity from violence.

As I was contacting and interviewing racist women, the structure of the racist movement also changed in two ways that increased my risk. First, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City occurred midway through my interviewing. In its wake, the racist movement went further underground. Racist groups were subject to investigation and members became increasingly sensitive to the possibility of police informants and infiltrators. Second, as a result of the heightened scrutiny of hate groups after the Oklahoma City bombing, the racist movement became less organized. Some adopted a strategy known as “leaderless resistance,” which was designed to make the racist movement less vulnerable to investigation and prosecution. Racist activists began to operate in small units or cells, sometimes in pairs or even alone, to avoid detection by authorities. While adhering to a common agenda of Aryan supremacism, they were able to develop their own strategies, even select enemies, without answering to formal leaders; they used the Internet or other anonymous means to disseminate their ideas rather than relying on organized groups.³¹

Leaderless resistance makes studying the racist movement scarier because it reduces the accountability of individual racists. When I attended a racist rally in the later stages of my research, I came with the permission of the rally’s leader. I felt, or at least hoped, that his invitation would ensure my safety. Yet a significant number of those in attendance felt no allegiance to him; they did not care whether their words or actions might reflect on the group or implicate its leader. The *organization* of organized racism, I realized, was double-pronged. It channeled the racist beliefs of members into collective strategies of terrorism, building an

agenda of racist practices that could be catastrophic. But it could also curb the violence of particular individuals, unruly members whose actions could bring the collective and its leaders to the attention of the authorities. Without leaders, such restraints do not exist.

My fear was caused by more than simple proximity to racist groups. It was deliberately fed by the women I interviewed, who hoped to limit the scope of my study and shape my analysis. When I have done research on other topics, an awkward inequality in power has separated me, the scholarly authority, from those I interviewed. But here, my feelings of fear put us on the same level. The racist women constantly drew attention to my vulnerability to them, asking whether I was afraid to come see them, whether I was afraid to be in their homes. Others suggested that I risked harm if I did—or sometimes if I did not—interview a particular person in the movement. Even a woman in prison on death row, who was brought to our interview in handcuffs, found a way to undermine any power I had over her by noting that she could call on gangs of allies in and outside the prison walls. “I’m not scared of anybody,” she told me, “so I’m not gonna worry about it. I’ll say what I got to say . . . ’cause I got the Jamaican Posse and the Cuban Posse all behind me, they gonna kick ass.”

Some women were more indirect in their intimidation. Many bragged of their group’s violence, making it clear that they treated enemies harshly. An Aryan supremacist boasted that the racist movement attracted people who were “totally messed up and totally mindless,” people who were prone to “fight and kill, rip off armored cars, get guns.” Others were even more specific about how their comrades retaliated against enemies. A self-proclaimed lesbian neo-Nazi described the aftermath of a conflict she had with two African American women: “And so I called my ex-girlfriend about it, I’m like, ‘Well D——, I have a job for you to do.’ She’s like, ‘What’s wrong?’ I said ‘I want you to fuck somebody up for me.’ She said, ‘No problem, Mommy. I’d do anything for you. I love you Mommy.’” Even now, years after completing the interviews, I receive signed and anonymous letters warning that they “are watching” me, that I had better tell “the truth” about them and their movement.

Often the women saw even the selection of where we would conduct the interview as an opening to use intimidation. Usually, I asked each woman to choose a place where she would feel comfortable, although I reminded her that I did not want to be interrupted by family members or racist group comrades. Several suggested their homes, saying that they

would be most at ease there but also warning that their houses contained weapons and that other comrades (presumably less trustworthy than themselves) might appear at the house during the interview. Others picked a public place but indicated that they would station armed comrades nearby in case the interview did not “proceed as planned.” On only two occasions did I refuse a suggestion for an interview site, both for safety reasons. One woman wanted me to be blindfolded and transported to an unknown destination in the back of a truck. Another proposed a meeting in a very remote racist compound to which I would have to be driven by a racist group member. And even in these cases, when my concerns for personal safety denied them their choice, they continued the implicit threats. For example, after the woman who had wanted me to be blindfolded agreed on a more visible site, she assured me that I should not be concerned for my safety there because “men with guns” would be hidden along the street “in case of a police raid.” Negotiations over terms and settings thus provided the women the opportunity to gain some control over the interview by putting me off balance with allusions to guns, hidden compounds, and the like.

But fear went both ways. These women were afraid of me. I could betray their confidences to the police, to enemies, or to family members who were not aware of their activities. Telling me about their journey into organized racism could feel empowering to them, but it could also expose them to retribution. One Washington racist skinhead worried that I might secretly funnel information to violent gangs of antiracist skinheads about buildings occupied by racist skinheads: “[After you leave], well, uh, I wonder if some skin’s house is gonna get Molotov-cocktailed and the [antiracist skinheads] are doing this in retaliation.” An older neo-Nazi was concerned that my tape recording of her interview “could be used against me in a court of law.” Many expressed suspicions about how I had found them at all. Throughout the interview a woman from the East repeatedly asked, “Just how did you become aware of the group that I’m in?” Worried that such fears could derail the interview, I assured each woman that her interview would be confidential and that I would not ask questions about illegal activities.

Some women used fear as a strategy to protect themselves not from actual jeopardy but from revelations that might reflect badly on them personally. Once fear of exposure was established as a realistic concern, they cited it to justify not answering questions about boyfriends or parents, their performance in school, and even their taste in music. The flimsiness of this excuse was clear from their willingness to divulge gen-

uinely incriminating information: I had to interrupt several of these same women to keep them from telling me about their illegal activities or plans. A young Nazi activist in California, for example, deflected nearly all my inquiries about her family by saying that she was being constantly watched by the police, who could use such information against her, yet she repeatedly returned to an unsolicited story about her friends who “buried their guns in oil drums up in the hills for when the race war comes.”

Racists also used their own fear to create rapport to keep the interview moving. Usually the task of creating rapport falls to the researcher, who generally has the most to gain from a successful interview. But many of these women were highly motivated to have me hear their stories. Thus, even as they tried to make me more afraid, they often pointed to their vulnerability to me; a woman might emphasize my exposure in the well-guarded living room of a racist leader, and at the same time observe that I probably had “really good connections to the police.” At times, this tempering became nearly comical; one interviewee repeatedly made note of the guns and sketches of lynchings that lay around her living room but then sought to assure me that although “the average person has an idea that the Klan is very military [violent] and they’re afraid,” she was no threat, because she “wasn’t aware of [that reputation] until just recently.” But fear did help bring our sense of risk to the same level, making plain the stalemate in which we at least seemed to be equally unsafe.

Although the danger of engaging with racist activists actually increased while I was interviewing these women, I became less afraid over time, for reasons that are disturbing. The first interviews, conducted largely with members of the Ku Klux Klan, left me nearly paralyzed with fear. My field journal is full of notes on how to increase my own safety. Before each interview, I made elaborate preparations, giving friends instructions on what to do if I did not return on schedule. Yet my field notes on the last interviews, conducted largely with neo-Nazis and white power skinheads—members of groups that in recent years have been more likely than the Klan to engage in overt violence—show that my fears had largely abated. I took personal risks that earlier I would have found unthinkable. I had become more numb to tales of assaults and boasts of preparing for “race war.”

It is terrifying to realize that you find it difficult to be shocked. But gradually my dealings with racist women became like a business transaction, with both parties parrying for favorable terms. I was not un-

afraid, but I took fewer precautions based on fear. Perhaps this change in attitude explains why my later interviews were less productive. In the earlier interviews, the tension created by fear made me think hard. As it subsided, some of my analytical edge slipped away as well. I was becoming anesthetized to the horrors of organized racism, a numbness that was personally dismaying and that also signaled my need to regain emotional distance from this research before writing about it—a process that took years.

During his lengthy convalescence from a leg injury, the neurologist Oliver Sacks discovered that his visual depth perception had become foreshortened: “Not the least part of the terror was that I experienced no terror. I had no sense, no realization, of how contracted I was, how insensibly I had become contracted to the locus of my sickbed and sick-room.”³² As I researched organized racism for more than a decade, my perceptions similarly became unconsciously attenuated. At the beginning, my insight was sharp and my emotions were constantly wrenched. Later, my vision and emotions were dulled, worn down by the emotional confinement of studying racism from within.

My experience suggests something about what it must feel to be inside a racist group: how the bizarre begins to feel normal, taken-for-granted, both unquestioned and unquestionable; how Jews or African Americans or gay men might come to seem so demonic and so personally threatening that group members could be moved to actions that seem incomprehensible to those on the outside. This state of mind results from a perceptual contraction that is all but imperceptible to the actor.

My feelings of fear also provide insight into the internal workings of racist groups. Fear is highly salient in the racist movement. Since they are greatly outnumbered by the racial, sexual, religious, and political groups they seek to destroy, organized racists use physical intimidation and the threat of violence to gain power over their opponents. Demonstrations, marches, violent propaganda, cross burnings, and terroristic actions are meant to demonstrate the strength of the racial movement and induce fear among enemies. So are the shocking cartoons and graphics that are the mainstay of racist propaganda. Racists pay close attention to their opponents’ reactions, noting with glee any indication that they are feared by other groups or by the public. And fear is wielded within their groups as well. Members are warned repeatedly of the dire consequences that might befall them if they defect, particularly if they betray the group to the outside. These are not idle threats, as those who leave racist groups often risk violence at the hands of their former com-

rades. While I was doing these interviews, police on the East Coast were investigating the chilling abduction, assault, and near-murder of a young girl by a mixed-sex gang of skinheads who feared that she would defect from the group.

Members of the racist movement also are reminded by their groups and leaders that they have much to fear from the “outside” world. Racist activists incessantly speak of the terrors that they would face outside the protective shelter of the organized racist movement. Even for those whose initial decision to join a racist group was not driven by fear of others such concerns grew over time. In this sense, what is learned in the racist movement is fear of those who are nonwhite, non-Aryan, and nonracist.

The emotional world of organized racism becomes clearer when I consider the emotional work I needed to do to study racist groups.³³ In the course of interviewing, I constantly sensed the need to display certain feelings. Sometimes I mimicked what I did not feel, forcing myself to laugh along with the more innocuous comments, hoping to establish rapport and fend off anecdotes that might be more offensive. At other times I withheld the emotions I did feel, maintaining a blank and studied expression when confronted with cross burnings or propaganda that glorified Nazi atrocities or even the interviewee’s warped take on current events. In an interview done right after the Oklahoma City bombing, as the sickening images of the bombing were still in the newspapers and fresh in my mind, a woman told me that the people in her group “were happy about what happened in Oklahoma. There’s a lot of anger out there. The people, some felt sorry for the [white] children but the rest of them got what they deserved, the government deserved. The government provoked this. . . . It’s like in Germany when the skinheads went on the streets and burned down the refugee centers and the townspeople poured out and applauded. It could reach that point here.” Throughout, I had to feign interest in the women’s intricate stories of hatred, to ask questions in a neutral tone, and to be responsive when I wanted to flee or scream. But by examining my emotional work, I gained some insight into how the racist movement manipulates the emotions of its members, evoking not just fear but also awe.

Individual and political needs collide in writing about racism. As we acknowledge the rationality of racist women, we must never forget the evil they do. Yet writing from, and about, the stories of racist women runs the risk of personalizing them too much, making their ideas more

sympathetic or less odious. It may subtly lend an academic gloss to the importance of racist activists, empowering them to work harder on behalf of their beliefs.³⁴ These are dangerous outcomes—but the consequences of not learning from and about racists are worse.

If we stand too far back from racist groups and fail to look carefully at the women and men in organized racism, we are likely to draw politically misleading conclusions. Superficial studies simply caricature racist activists and make organized racism a foil against which we see ourselves as righteous and tolerant. We cannot simply comb the backgrounds of racist activists in search of a flaw—an absent parent, childhood victimization, or economic hard times—that “explains” their racist commitment. Moreover, we cannot use Germany in the 1930s as a prototype for all movements of the extreme right. Economic distress and social dislocation may explain the rise of such large-scale, powerful movements as the German Nazis or earlier American racist organizations, but such factors play only a small role in the tiny and politically marginal racist movement in the United States today.

We gain far more by taking a direct, hard look at the members of modern racist groups, acknowledging the commonalities between them and mainstream groups as well as the differences. In this book I tell the story of modern organized racism from the inside, focusing on how racist activists understand themselves and their worldviews. In the first section I explore the process of becoming a racist activist. Chapter 1 examines the creation of a racist self in racist groups, exploring how individuals come to adopt individual identities as racist activists. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the formation of collective identities in racist groups, as racist group members learn about whiteness and its enemies. The second section of the book explores the world within organized racism. Chapter 4 details the gendered contours of racist groups and the contradictory experiences of women in racist groups. In chapter 5 I examine the cultural foundation of organized racism, particularly the ways in which cultural practices create political loyalties. The conclusion builds on the understandings gained in this study to offer ideas for combating racist groups.

My intent is to present organized racism critically, pointing out its conceptual errors and its loathsome implications. I assume that readers will condemn racist ideas and practices. However, I am not able here to give equal time to the voices of antiracist activists or the victims of racist violence.³⁵ That work is done much more effectively by antiracist monitoring and activist groups, some of which are listed in appendix 3.

BECOMING A RACIST



THE RACIST SELF

What are racist activists like? The news media typically depict them as semiarticulate, lower-class men (and sometimes women) who spew venomous sentiments about African Americans, Jews, and immigrants. Implicit is the message that people become racist activists because they hold intensely racist beliefs and want to keep racial minorities subordinated. For the same reason that poor people are expected to support welfare rights groups more readily than the wealthy do, racist groups are assumed to recruit most successfully among those who have an interest in keeping racial minorities oppressed, in particular poor whites who compete directly with minority groups for jobs, housing, and other resources.¹

Surprisingly, recruitment by racist groups in the United States does not fit this pattern. White supremacist skinhead groups lure disaffected youth, including those from affluent suburbs. Some neo-Nazis come from politically progressive families. Even the Ku Klux Klan, traditionally the closest to the stereotype of lower-class racists, is attracting middle-class members. Interestingly, many racist groups find overwhelmingly white areas like the Pacific Northwest to be more receptive to their message than are more racially mixed regions.

Consider Jill, a young white supremacist skinhead active in neo-Nazi violence in a small western city. Jill's early life does not fit the media stereotype. Her parents were racially tolerant Democrats, she admitted to me with some embarrassment. Moreover, Jill described her family as

emotionally stable and supportive. Although some interviewees distort their depictions of past family life to justify their current situations, I found Jill's account believable because she was estranged from her parents and had little reason to speak of them so warmly.

When I met her, Jill lived with a shifting group of young skinheads in a nearly empty warehouse near the center of a city. In every respect, Jill had severed her connections with mainstream society. She had no regular job, had dropped out long before completing high school, and hinted at a lengthy arrest record, mostly for minor offenses. Her life was consumed by parties with friends and the struggle to fend off what she regarded as legions of enemies—the police, landlords, African Americans, and disapproving family members. Despite her sullen and hostile demeanor, Jill talked to me at great length, perhaps passing the time until something more exciting happened.

Describing how she became a skingirl, Jill recalled, "I'd always had long beautiful hair. Everyone loved it. I went to a party and for some reason a man I'd had a crush on for a little over a year said to me, 'You would look great with a chopsie [haircut],' and I said okay, and I shaved my head." Note that at this point in her story, Jill does not connect ideas of race with her decision to shave her head. Rather disingenuously, Jill suggests that she adopted a skinhead hairstyle without considering its larger implications. "For some reason," she relates dreamily, a hoped-for boyfriend suggested that she shave her head (here, only the word *chopsie* hints at his racist affiliation). And, seeking his approval, she complied.

This minor action—cutting her hair in deference to another's tastes—is pivotal to the larger story that Jill tells. It is her shaved head, she says, that sparked a cycle of reaction that deepened her connection with members of a skinhead group:

That's when it all became very real. My parents had always known, "She's just rebelling but she's keeping up her grades and she's still working part-time and there's no problem. You know we can't control her life." Then I shaved my head. People that I worked with, you know, obviously gave me a hard time. They never said I could no longer work there, they were just teasing me, [but] I quit. My grades started to drop. My parents gave me the ultimate, "No more of this." . . . And I made the choice to leave [home] and join [the skinheads].

As she elaborates her account, Jill tells the story of her head-shaving differently, now positioning herself as the main character. The decision

to cut her hair is recast: no longer simply reflecting acquiescence to an intended boyfriend, it takes its place as one in a series of rebellions from her parents. In this telling, the act of haircutting marks a boundary, signifying that Jill's parents have lost control over her life. Jill decides to quit her job, leave home, and become a white power skinhead. Neither version of the story suggests that Jill was propelled into white supremacist politics by her racial beliefs. Nor did her life circumstances (good grades, nonracist parents) appear to push her toward particularly racist ways of thinking. Indeed, Jill's entry into organized racism seems to have had the most trivial causes—teenage rebellion and a man's comment on her hairstyle.

Although Jill's story might be dismissed as an example of the political vicissitudes of youth, women commonly talk in these terms about joining racist groups. Janice, a middle-aged Aryan supremacist from the Midwest, described her move into organized racism with similar dispassion: "I met people that I knew who were white supremacists, but it didn't faze me. I guess it didn't really seem real at that point. And it was just a social thing at first and you met more people. Then I joined." Her story, like the younger Jill's, is split into two stages—an earlier period marked by her *passivity*, lack of agency, and unreality ("it didn't faze me") and a later period marked by her *choice* ("then I joined"). The dividing point is the experience of meeting racist activists. Like Jill, Janice did not characterize her entry into organized racism as a heartfelt search for a way to express her beliefs or safeguard her interests. Rather, she presented becoming a white supremacist as something that just happened, tied more closely to her social life than to her ideology.

Hardly any white supremacist women I met talked about joining organized racism as finding an outlet for long-held beliefs. Instead, their stated reasons for enlisting in racist groups appeared to have little to do with racist ideology. Nor did all these women come from backgrounds that might favor racist careers. Although some came from racist families or mixed neighborhoods filled with racial tension, others grew up in racially tolerant families or all-white suburbs. Indeed, more than one-third of the women I interviewed identified their parents as Democrats, progressives, or even leftists. Many of the other two-thirds described their parents as moderate or nonpolitical, and only a handful called them right-wing or racist.

Apparently, racist beliefs and a racist upbringing are not prerequisites for joining a racist group. As accounts by racist recruiters suggest, people can learn racist views *after* joining. Intense racism can be the result, not

the cause, of involvement with organized racism. In his confessional autobiography, the German former neo-Nazi skinhead Ingo Hasselbach describes his efforts to recruit young boys: he sought not right-wing zealots but youngsters who would be attracted to the exclusive and forbidden nature of extremism. Once potential recruits were identified, Hasselbach set out to teach them racist ideas:

I liked to approach 14- to 16-year-olds after school. We looked for kids wearing bomber jackets and Dr. Martens. Usually they didn't really have a political position, but for whatever reason they'd decided it was cool to be right-wing. The first thing I did when I met one of these boys was to show that I wanted to be his friend, to hang out with him, which, coming from someone older, especially someone over 20, was a real compliment. I'd act a lot like an older brother; we'd go into the woods together and do things like Boy Scout exercises, building forts and making trails. I'd always slip in a bit of ideology against foreigners along the way. . . . But only casually at first.²

Similarly, the women I interviewed more often described their sense of racist urgency as a *consequence* of associating with members of racist groups than as its *cause*. Much like male and female participants in a wide variety of social movements and groups—from political parties to civic groups to bowling leagues—women in racist groups tend to be recruited by meeting someone who already belongs to the group, and they may have little prior connection to the group's ideas.³ Fewer than one-fourth of my interviewees said that they took any action to seek out a racist group. Most had some baseline of negative sentiments toward African Americans—but given the pervasiveness of racism in the white mainstream population, that hardly explains why these particular white women entered the racist movement. In general, they became committed racists only as they got to know racist activists and began to participate in racist actions.

The most common route into organized racism clearly is through contact with a racist group member. But how does that contact occur? And why do some women cross the boundary into organized racism while others do not? Though we may never know for certain what makes any person choose to follow a specific path while another, identically situated, does not, my interviews with racist women suggest that opportunities for contact with a racist group member depend in part on social *location*. Some people are in positions and places in society that make them more likely to meet those from racist groups.⁴ Those with

racist activists in their families have a natural link. Those connected to groups that serve as recruiting grounds for racist organizations, such as clubs of gun owners, survivalist networks, or some hard-core music scenes, have a greater chance of meeting racist activists. The same is true for people in prisons or in those workplaces and schools where racist groups have a foothold. Even geography can play a part, as it did for Ken Loff, a convicted member of the terrorist group known as The Order: he was raised Catholic and had a Jewish best man at his wedding but drifted into the racist underground when he moved to the Pacific Northwest and met people from Aryan Nations.⁵

Of course, not all those who come into contact with racist group members join their groups. Indeed, only a small minority do so. While a few find the proffered images of community, identity, hope, and purpose very alluring, others reject such claims as fraudulent. That is, people vary in their *receptivity* to racist messages. The sociologist James Aho found that Christian Patriots in Idaho were what he termed “active seekers,” poised to find a racist message persuasive.⁶ The stories that racist women told me can be interpreted in the same way. As I discuss later, many women paint their lives prior to joining a racist group as a search for meaning, suggesting they would be receptive to the simplistic “answers” provided by organized racism. But dissecting people’s pasts to discover motives is a tricky undertaking. These women may have been receptive because they were seeking answers—or they may be presenting themselves as seekers only in retrospect. The events in most lives can be seen as fairly haphazard or can be arranged to look like a quest for answers to personal or social problems. We must be careful not to create explanations that become a template to which all evidence can be shaped.

Ultimately, location in society, like differences in receptivity, cannot fully account for the entrance of certain women into racist groups. Some of the women I interviewed drifted from one extreme cause to another, but others came into organized racism from a life seemingly in the mainstream. Some had friends who steadfastly refused to be involved in racist groups even when those closest to them joined, but other women gravitated to racist groups on the strength of a brief acquaintance with a group member. A nineteen-year-old skinhead described her first encounter with white supremacists:

Well, they used to have like Bible studies here, the white supremacists here. . . . I went to them even though I’m not necessarily all for the

Bible but I went there and started getting involved with them, and they would have like demonstrations and marches and stuff around here. So I started going with them to offer support and then. . . . Well, a friend of mine went to one of their meetings one time and she told me about it and then I went to it the next week, and then I started getting involved in it.

This skingirl came in contact with racist activists through an interest in Bible studies, which might also indicate her receptivity to their dualistic visions of good and evil. But nothing in her story suggests that she was seeking an outlet for racist politics when she began going to white supremacist meetings. Rather, she presents organized racism as something that just happened *to* her, the result of a series of minor actions pursued without a particular political objective.⁷

She is not the only woman who drifted into a racist group because of an accidental encounter. Many recount connecting up with old friends who had taken up with racist groups or chancing to meet someone involved in the racist movement. One woman told me of becoming reacquainted with Bill, a former classmate active in organized racism, while she was on vacation: "I'm thinking, 'Oh, well. I haven't seen him for a while. I wondered what's going on with him.' Went up and talked to him. Now, he always used to be known as 'Nazi Bill.' I could take it or leave it, didn't matter. Now, Bill seemed like he was pretty good people. He was a cool guy." It is disturbing to think that becoming racist may be even partly a matter of chance. Yet accident clearly plays a role in leading many of these women into racist politics. The places they lived or worked, the kinds of friends they had, how they spent their time, where they partied, and their general susceptibility to racist appeals all were important in their becoming racist activists. But these factors alone do not predict who will come into contact with a racist group and who will not, who will find their life transformed by organized racism and who will not. Simple happenstance is often an element of racist affiliation.

It is hard to reconcile such casual motives with the dangers of joining organized racism. Though being on the fringe of society is appealing to some, most women find that the cost is high. Enlisting in the Klan or neo-Nazi groups can mean the loss of a job or career. Nearly everyone who joins loses friends and family members, and some risk their lives. Scholarship on right-wing extremist groups suggests three possible explanations for why women like Jill or Janice embark on a

life of racist activism for reasons that, on their own account, appear so flimsy.

First, these women could be the victims of “brainwashing.” This notion, commonly found in studies of prisoners or kidnapping victims who come to identify with their captors, is used to explain how groups can command allegiance, even loyalty, from originally recalcitrant or hostile individuals. Although the simplicity of this explanation is appealing, the women I interviewed showed no signs of having been coerced into racist activism; their statements gave no hint of intense pressure to join racist groups or adopt racist ideas. To the contrary, Jill and Janice describe being in white supremacism as an *option* in their lives, a path chosen rather than imposed.

Second, they (and all adherents to right-wing extremism) could be crazy or ill-adjusted.⁸ Certainly, some women I interviewed showed signs of personal pathologies or had troubled family histories. But I could not determine whether their psychological disorders were a cause or an outcome of their being in a racist group. And the racism of Jill and Janice, the educated and articulate products of stable middle-class families, cannot be explained by a deficient family life.

Third, Jill, Janice, and the others could be rational (if deplorable) political actors trying to gain advantages or stave off threats to their social, political, or economic status.⁹ Such an explanation, an interest-based account of racist activism, has several advantages. It acknowledges that racist groups vow to safeguard white and Christian dominance, a promise that appeals to the self-interest of many in the racist movement. It enables us to consider how some women might see organized racism as personally beneficial. It suggests that some aspects of racist groups, however odious to outsiders, might reasonably be found compelling. And it moves us beyond assuming, without evidence, that racists are brainwashed or crazy. Yet it cannot fully explain the motivations of racist women, since the advantages of organized racism for its members are less clear for women than for men. In addition to espousing racial and religious superiority, racist groups promote ideas of individualism, antiegalitarianism, nationalism, and traditional morality that are arguably harmful to, or at least problematic for, women. Individualism evokes the authority of self-reliant men over dependent women and children. Antiegalitarianism opposes efforts to curb the dominance of white men in workplaces and schools. Nationalism strengthens political identities of citizenship to which women are less securely attached. Traditional morality evokes a white patriarchal past.

Because women's interests and the agendas of racist movements do not clearly match, even an interest-based account must fall back on another, less satisfactory explanation—that men enlist in right-wing and racial politics to preserve or extend their obvious, identifiable interests and privileges, while women join because they are confused, are led astray by male intimates, or misidentify their interests. Thus, in a familiar pattern, women's actions are explained by appealing to psychology and men's to politics,¹⁰ even though there is no reason to assume that psychological factors are more salient for the women than the men in organized racism. In fact, the life stories of racist women suggest no difference in political commitment, knowledge, or gullibility: women, like their male counterparts, are drawn into racist groups through personal contacts with racist activists. Jill, Janice, and other women racists are better understood as rational social actors, a characterization long applied to men, than as idiosyncratic and peculiarly compliant racist followers.

But how can racist commitment be both rational and the product of casual acquaintance with a racist activist? How can women stumble into and yet embrace such a risky life? To understand this, we must modify the interest-based account of racist activism. We must consider how someone's understanding of what is in their self-interest—what is a rational political act—can be shaped in a social context. In other words, we must think of self-interest as socially constructed.¹¹ The racist women I interviewed joined male-dominated racist groups not because they were unaware of what was in their interests as women but because, as part of becoming racist activists, they reassessed their self-interests to fit the agendas of these groups. As they became involved with organized racism, they remade themselves in a racist mold. Men in racist groups also undergo social construction of a racist self, but their initial sense of their self-interest is much closer than the women's to the goals of racist groups.

Originally, neither Jill nor Janice was very focused on racism. Both held only ill-defined ideas, if any, about their self-interest as whites.¹² Once involved with racist group members, however, each began to consider herself and the world in more racialized terms. Jill changed from a stance of political apathy to what she described as "racial awareness," Janice from skirting the edges of white supremacy to speaking on its behalf. In the process, both Jill and Janice came to see their interests as diametrically opposed to those of non-Aryans.

The definition of self-interest is influenced by social interactions.¹³

Such influence can be seen in racist women's lengthy responses to my request that they describe themselves and their lives, that they provide their "life stories." As Jill became involved with racist skinheads, ideas about race became more important to her. She came to see her self-interest as opposed not so much to parents or school authorities as to racial minorities. Janice, too, responded to the shifting social contexts in which she found herself by reassessing her self-interest and identifying more strongly with organized white supremacy.

Because self-interest is not static, we cannot deduce the motives of racist activists from their backgrounds or current circumstances. Too often, commentaries on right-wing extremists are based on what the sociologists John Lofland and Norman Skonovd label "the fallacy of the uniformly profound"—the assumption that dramatic life outcomes must have dramatic causes.¹⁴ Thus analysts comb the past lives of racist activists, searching for the unusual events that can explain their subjects' present racial beliefs. Yet it is impossible to account for the racist activism of Jill, Janice, or most of the other women in this study by scrutinizing the events of their lives, which are mostly unremarkable. Even the circumstances that led them into encounters with racist activists are highly variable, fortuitous rather than predictable. The dramatic political outcomes of racist activism typically had quite mundane beginnings.

In their life stories, racist women reveal more than changing definitions of self-interest. They also relate the alterations in their very sense of who they are, their sense of self. Over time, Jill began to define herself through her racist activism. No longer "just another teenager," she was "someone who is proud to represent and protect my race." Janice, too, changed her sense of self; from someone with no particular political vision she became a person deeply committed to "make the world right."

The stories of racist women are important because it is through storytelling, or what scholars term "narrative," that people create a sense of themselves. Narratives integrate the various threads of life. They assemble incidents of the past to fashion a self in the present. Life stories thus are retrospectively "sense making," making the self coherent over time.¹⁵ At the same time, however, life stories can be unreliable. Accounts of the past are tinged by the commitments of the present. The sociologist C. Wright Mills's insight that motives often are furnished "after the act" should caution us against taking expressed motives at face value. As the sociologist David Snow and his colleagues find, in social movements "'motives' for joining or continued participation are generally emergent and interactional rather than pre-structured."¹⁶

Events and circumstances in the past are highlighted in memory when they seem to lead to the circumstances of the present and ignored when they do not: “some aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some are put together in ways that would have previously been inconceivable.”¹⁷ Thus women for whom racist activism was an abrupt change from their past lives paint their backgrounds bleakly, as inadequate or confusing. Those few for whom racist activism was life-long speak of their past more positively.

Life stories also create templates of action. The sociologist Margaret Somers notes that narratives “can be a precondition for knowing what to do.” When people tell stories about themselves, points out the social psychologist Margaret Wetherell, they “are attempting to develop positions which might relate their current lives to what has gone before, rendering the past, the present and the future plausible and meaningful.” Life stories thus justify and make sense of current political directions that might appear inconsistent with the values and directions of an earlier life. Moreover, the relationship between storytelling and other action is dynamic. Actions shape new stories, just as narratives create new directions for action.¹⁸

To align themselves with racial goals, racial activists transform their understandings of self. As one southern Klanswoman put it: “It is not so much that I am in the Klan, it is the fact that the Klan is in me. By the Klan being in me I have no choice other than to remain, I can’t walk away from myself.” Another woman, from a neo-Nazi group, commented: “[The movement] helps, especially at that awkward stage when no one exactly knows who they are. It gives you an identity, it says you’re special, you know, because you’re white.”

By constructing a racial sense of self and self-interest, and by learning racist group ideologies (discussed in the following chapters), fairly ordinary women, most from typical families and places, become wedded to dangerous and bizarre racist agendas.

STORIES OF A RACIST SELF

The life stories of racist women vividly exemplify how notions of self and self-interest can be fashioned in a racist social context. Their accounts offer two different stories of the self. What I call *stories of becoming a racist* tell of transformations in the story of the *past* self; what

I call *stories about being a racist* detail changes in the *current* and *future* self.

Stories of Becoming a Racist

Some women explain their involvement in organized racism by presenting it as the result of dramatic personal transformation. These are stories of *becoming* a racist. Although a few women I interviewed grew up in racist activist families, most did not, and their stories of coming to the racist movement reflect this change.

For racist women, accounts of personal transformation typically take the form of a conversion story, not unlike stories told by converts to religion, sobriety, or feminism.¹⁹ In his studies of the fascist British National Front, Michael Billig discusses this conversion as a process of adopting the official personality of the group, of redefining reality in accord with their new values and beliefs.²⁰ Similarly, racist women recount a change in their total worldview, a shift in their “sense of ultimate grounding.”²¹ As converts to racial activism, they describe moving from racial naïveté to racist enlightenment. In their life stories, the more mundane details of actual recruitment to racist groups are glossed over or omitted. What they stress—indeed, what they remember—is a sense of the changed self.

Conversion stories are a narrative genre. Typically, they involve three elements: autobiographical incidents, themes from the larger culture, and ideas from the group to which the teller is converting.²² Thus a religious conversion story generally details the sense of meaninglessness or family problems that dominated the nonspiritual life; the power of religious faith to help the convert achieve greater personal happiness, inner strength, or other goods valued in the culture generally; and the spiritual enlightenment made possible by the newly acquired religious beliefs. The racist conversion stories related by women in my interviews similarly draw on autobiography, mainstream culture, and racist ideologies.

Events of the Individual's Past Autobiographical elements dominate racist conversion stories, as the women string together what they now see as the most significant incidents of their past. In selecting the events that give shape to their life stories, racist women are strongly influenced by their current racist commitments. The importance of events that illus-

trate racial conflict—even those that perhaps seemed insignificant at the time—is magnified. For example, clashes with children from other races on school buses or playgrounds that seem trivial to me frequently loom large in racist women's stories. Such incidents probably take on their personal significance, or perhaps are seen as racial at all, only in retrospect. The racist world in which these women now live shapes what they tell about their past.

Themes from Mainstream Culture Four themes from mainstream culture appear frequently in these conversion stories: religion, body, boundaries, and quest. The first is the most common: even women in racist groups that virulently reject mainline religion for favoring racial equality construct their life stories as a spiritual conversion. They recount their turn to racism as moving from evil to ultimate good, prompted by the promise of personal and collective salvation. Such stories, like the accounts of religious transitions examined by Virginia Brereton, have at best a “complex relationship” to the real ordering of life events;²³ but they do attest to the power of religion as a narrative genre.

Too, the body figures often in conversion stories. Some describe an assault on the body—an invasion, attack, or trauma—as moving them to active racism. Others express the absorption of racial commitment into the body—“I am in the Klan [and] the Klan is in me”—as marking conversion to the racial movement.

Boundaries also play a crucial role, because racist women present their commitment to racism as a move across the divide separating their earlier and subsequent life worlds. Sometimes they emphasize their informed decision to move away from one world and embrace another. One woman told me, “Being part of the movement, I have more of a commitment to want to separate [from minority groups] and do what I believe is right and stand together with people and not be so quick to be divided by other people.” Others stress the boundaries imposed from the outside, seen as forcibly separating them from their earlier life. Laura, for example, remarked: “[After I became a Nazi], I was very surprised when one of my friends from church stopped calling. I said [to a mutual friend], ‘How is she? She hasn’t called me or returned a call that I had made to her,’ and he said, ‘She’s afraid to come here.’ I said, ‘What? How can that be?’”

The idea of a quest is important in all conversion narratives. In her study of women's conversion to holiness and Pentecostal religions, Brereton identified two such stories. One is constructed as “a series of quests,

with each quest becoming more intense, more extreme, the result more rewarding.” The other features “a deep dark valley (conviction) followed by a high bright peak (conversion), followed in turn by a series of progressively less extreme valleys and peaks (periods of backsliding and renewal).”²⁴

The story related by Nancy, a white supremacist skinhead and neo-Nazi organizer from the Southwest, mirrored Brereton’s plot of successive enlightenment: “It was pretty gradual. I gradually started writing to other organizations and I started getting other publications and newsletters and started writing articles of my own and then I just gradually got into more and more until I opened the post office boxes [for a neo-Nazi group]. It was really gradual. It wasn’t just like I woke up one day and decided, ‘Oh I’m gonna go and do that.’ I slowly got into it.” In contrast, a long account by Lillie, a midwestern supporter of a national Nazi group, typifies a conversion story of valleys and peaks. Her entry into organized racism was a decade-long struggle to accept “the truth” of Nazism. Despite her initial “excitement” at finding “the truth that made sense” and her insistence that Nazi doctrine should be credited with “freeing” her from a life of drugs and confusion, Lillie joined and then quit a number of racist organizations because she feared the possible consequences of being an active Nazi; she had repeatedly reverted to her old life of apolitical partying before finding her current group.

Ideologies of Racist Groups Just as religious organizations provide specific frameworks that teach people how to think about their spiritual conversion,²⁵ so, too, racist groups shape the individual stories of their converts. Because racist ideologies starkly separate “us” from “them,” racist conversion stories tend to split into two parts. They begin with a weak, ignorant, directionless, and naive self that is abandoned and replaced by a newly constructed all-knowing, committed, impassioned self.

The racist group message that racial “enemies” are everywhere and that Aryans are victims also permeates the life stories of racist women. For example, racist women talk of their fear that they will be victimized if they are identified as Nazis, sounding a theme of persecution that is common among racist groups. Their conversion stories are filled with episodes of social sanction, describing how “I lost a lot of friends at first because my friends were antiracist” or how “people pass judgment on [white power] skinheads. Just because their heads are shaven, they are looked down on,” and insisting that “you get pulled over by the cops

around here because they saw your face on TV and they know you're a racist. And they write you a ticket just for the heck of it." The more violent incidents that they recount eerily mirror the experiences of minority group members at the hands of avowed racists: "A friend of mine had a friend who was shot simply for being a skinhead. He had done nothing provoking others and a Negro came up to him and asked him, 'Are you a skinhead?'—I suppose because he had a shaved head. All he did was reply, 'Yes,' and he was shot and killed."

The interweaving of autobiographical episodes, themes from mainstream culture, and the ideologies of racist groups informs both the general shape of these conversion stories and the women's understanding of specific turning points in their lives. As they reflect on their earlier, nonpolitical life, many seize on a single sensational event or tightly linked series of events to explain how their personal goals and beliefs became fused with the agendas and ideas of the racial movement. This dramatic pivot might have had little significance in their life stories before they joined a racist group. After joining, however, it is seen as a moment of decisive awakening that reveals the essential difference between clarity and confusion and between likeness and otherness, making them acutely aware that Jews, African Americans, or agents of the federal government control the economy, politics, even the minutiae of daily life.

Heidi, a Christian Identity adherent, described to me her "awakening" after seeing the biased news coverage of a criminal trial of white separatists: "I realized that what you hear on the television and everything is not the true story. They don't tell you all the persecution that's happening to people who want to [racially] separate today. We just hear little snippets of it and then if you investigate you find out the *true* story."

Though they present abstract rationales for subsequent racial activism, conversion stories imply a personal experience that crystallizes understanding and prompts a voyage of discovery—even when that pivotal event bears no recognizable connection to the individual's life. An elderly Nazi woman recalled that her turning point came when a federal commission investigating her local schools, to which she had no personal link, concluded that "there was no racial animosity or hostility" in them: "They just whitewashed it. Even the school officials would not return the calls of upset parents. The school board members would not see parents in their office or anything during that time."

Strikingly, many stories of conversion to racist activism pivot around

dramatic encounters with death—a personal near-death experience, the loss of a loved one, even the death of a pet. Individual stories of bodily trauma and pain are transformed into a story of racist conversion. They are recast as ordeals that clarified racial perception, sharpened values about race, and revealed the racial dynamics of history.²⁶

Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old racist skinhead on death row for murder and robbery in a southern state, cited a car accident as her personal turning point; after she was injured, “it’s like, my whole attitude changed . . . my mind focused more on white supremacy.” In contrast to Jill, the skinhead who had nonracist parents, Amanda recalled being taught racism by her parents “since the day I was born.” However, she never felt inclined to act on those beliefs until she awoke from a coma. Amanda’s descriptions of the loss of control she felt as a hospital patient—“IVs in my arms, tubes in my nose”—blurred together with images of African American nurses surrounding her bedside, probing and invading her body. Her assertions of self against the dehumanization and bodily invasion of the hospital thus took on a racialized cast for which her earlier belief system had prepared her: “I said [to the African American nurses], ‘Don’t touch me. Don’t get near me . . . leave me alone.’” It was this incident, she concluded, that brought her into a “racial awareness” that made her get involved with neo-Nazi gangs. And, indeed, what Amanda tells of her life after hospitalization reflects a new racial commitment. Speaking of a cousin who had married an African American man, she said that before the accident she had been cordial to her, seeing family loyalty as more important than race; but afterward, “that was it. . . . I walked out the door and I haven’t spoken to her since.”

Other conversion-by-near-death stories put the antecedents rather than the outcomes of personal catastrophe in racial terms. That of Judy, a prominent middle-aged Aryan leader on the East Coast, was typical. Her racial commitment was born when she was seriously injured in a hit-and-run accident while living in a impoverished area of Cleveland. The beginnings of her life story provided little hint that racism would become so important to her. The daughter of middle-class parents, Judy began her marriage to an upwardly mobile professional man optimistically. As she spoke of those years she focused on domestic events—marriage, pregnancy, child rearing. She said she was determined to stay away from social problems by staying close to home and following her parents’ advice: “don’t be prejudiced, try to get along, do your best you can do.” Even as she described a series of personal calamities—a mis-

carriage, divorce, and her rapid downward economic slide, with her two small children—Judy continued to present herself as determined and self-possessed.

But when she spoke of taking her children to Cleveland in search of better employment, Judy's story shifted. The accident—and its racial ramifications—became the core around which her life story unfolded. Judy took nearly an hour to tell me about her accident, as she tried to convey how her racist ideas had resulted from her personal experiences.

As she began her story about Cleveland, Judy described at length her struggle to maintain a “decent” life in squalid surroundings, providing a bridge between her self-assurance before the accident and her racial awareness after it. She presented herself as confident but also, in retrospect, as innocent about “the neighborhood”: “Now mind you the neighborhood is not good at all. But I'm thinking, okay, no problem, I just started this job . . . I'll stay here till the end of summer, by winter I'm straight, I got myself a good job. I can transfer my job. I reestablish myself and then I'll be back on towards [another neighborhood] which is a very good area.” To this point, the neighborhood's problems appear to be economic, not racial. But as her story progresses, it becomes less abstract and more racialized: the hard work of whites (to get to work, to keep a job, to find babysitters) is set against the inactivity of her African American neighbors. Now, racial factors are clear: “they” are responsible for the “bad” neighborhood, and Judy sees “them” as black.

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

Judy's racist views, though increasingly pronounced, here differ little from those of many other whites. According to her, they shifted into racial activism because *she* changed. Her ability to coexist with her African American neighbors and ignore their now-obvious crime and intolerance had depended on racial naïveté. Once she became more “aware,” such unconscious acceptance was no longer possible. Being struck by a car was the event that destroyed Judy's innocence and began her transformation. Key to this process was her certainty that “they”

were responsible for the accident. Although she acknowledged that she did not see the driver who hit her, Judy nonetheless maintained that it “must have been” an African American man from a neighboring house: “I ignored them but then I was hit by that car . . . I swear they hit me on purpose . . . because I would not have anything to do with them.”

Like Amanda, Judy described her racist action as following, almost unbidden, from her racial awakening: “Of course after I got hit by a car, that was *it* . . . I started getting into politics.” By assuming that the driver was African American, she made sense of this otherwise random tragedy, according it intent and purpose. Moreover, such a racial lens made sense of the financial and other hardships that she faced as a divorced mother with limited opportunities. But such racialized understanding did not come incrementally, or as the result of economic frustrations alone. Rather, for Judy becoming a racist was a sudden metamorphosis. She now saw the world as a racial battleground, and she had a sense of purpose. From that point on, Judy told me, her life was devoted to furthering Aryan supremacy.

The life story of Greta, a fifty-five-year-old Nazi from a small northern city, had a similar structure of racial awakening. The daughter of a wealthy doctor, Greta was herself a well-paid engineer; she admitted to me that for most of her life she did not hold racist or anti-Semitic views, an oversight she now sees as demonstrating her earlier “ignorance.” Part of her life story involved a complicated medical history. For her, the pivotal moment came in an operating room when she was being prepared for surgery. Note Greta’s increasingly conspiratorial tones, as she comes to see her situation as embodying the struggle between Aryan and Jew:

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

In this account, German (Aryan) innocence is counterposed against a disembodied but menacing presence who can literally take away voice and breath. Much later in the story, Greta interprets the encounter in a

way that simultaneously explains and structures her life story. As she attempted to build a medical malpractice case against the doctor and hospital, Greta met a woman who encouraged her to see her experience as one incident in a larger but vague conspiracy and who later introduced her to a local Nazi member from whom she learned the specifics of the conspiracy. These meetings led Greta to the “discovery” that her anesthesiologist was Jewish and that the hospital—along with the media, the government, nearly everything—was owned and controlled by Jews. Jews are both sinister and invisible, Greta concluded. That invisibility is the key to their awesome power to control the fate of unsuspecting Aryans.

The emphasis on pivotal personal events in the stories of Amanda, Judy, and Greta both reveals and conceals. It reveals how racist women reshape stories, even memories, of their past to fit their present racist activism. But it conceals how racist recruiting and conversion actually occur incrementally. Research on other extremist groups has demonstrated that slow changes are often buried in stories of dramatic transformation. In their study of terrorists, for example, Maxwell Taylor and Ethel Quayle find that personal events can establish “a boundary in many terrorist careers that marks a movement away from normal society,” yet “the identification of a precipitating event can also be a convenient post hoc rationalisation for a much more mundane process of gradual involvement.”²⁷ Indeed, Greta’s story illustrates how minor events can shape a racist career. A chance encounter with the conspiratorial woman precipitated a series of events that eventually culminated in her recruitment into a racist group. Greta’s subsequent, and decisive, meeting with the local Nazi member depended on that prior, accidental meeting.²⁸

The life stories of racist women are useful but complicated. While they show how activists mold themselves to the ideologies of racist groups, they are unreliable as accounts of actual political recruitment or ideological conversion. In fact, almost all the women interviewed, when pressed to construct detailed chronologies of their lives, reveal a pattern of recruitment to racial politics quite at odds with conversion-by-striking-event. Judy’s accident, for example, brought her not simply a blinding moment of awareness, as she first recounted, but contact with a locally prominent neo-Nazi who, she later told me, took care of her during her convalescence. Similarly, pursuit of a medical malpractice claim—not a sudden realization in the hospital—brought Greta together with local white power activists.

James Aho documents a similar pattern of incremental, personal recruitment among Christian Patriots. Cindy Cutler, the wife of an Aryan Nations leader, discovered Christian Identity after meeting her future husband at a Baptist church service. Lisa Minor, also in Aryan Nations, found racist activism when she met her husband after she had renounced her drug-centered life and had become “born again.” Men typically entered the movement in roughly the same way. As Aho notes, “with few exceptions, social bonding with the recruiter preceded the respondent’s intellectual commitment to the cause.” Aho’s conclusion, consistent with my findings, was that Christian Patriots “joined with others and only later began articulating [the cause’s] dogma.”²⁹

Thus, racial conversion stories are best understood not as literal accounts of the process of ideological transformation but as *learned* accounts, shaped retrospectively by mainstream cultural themes as well as by the political, ideological, and even stylistic conventions dominant in racist groups.

Sarah’s Story The story of Sarah, an older neo-Nazi activist, is worth exploring in some detail as an example of the construction of self along racist lines. Despite Sarah’s reputation as a “hard-core” Nazi and her numerous arrests for violent acts over a lengthy career in organized racism—both factors that might have made her reticent in the interview—she needed little prompting to give an elaborate account of her life, which she organized as a series of passages.

Sarah’s opening statement, “You know, my views have changed tremendously over the years,” established the recurrent theme of ideological change. It was illustrated by groups of incidents bundled together. The sequence of events in each episode was the same: Sarah experienced unjust treatment, perceived its unfairness, initially did nothing, and ultimately was forced to defend herself. Over time, Sarah changed: her responses to this pattern altered. She saw herself as getting smarter through experience, as she became more adept at finding the racial causes of her problems.

Sarah began with her childhood: “I was raised in Chicago. In order to get an education you literally had to beat, no, let’s not be nasty (laugh), you had to be adept to get an education because if you didn’t then the blacks would just keep beating you and robbing you.” She described the injustice of having to walk miles to school every day in snow and rain while African Americans were bused to school in a “nice warm bus” and of having to suffer assaults by African American girls

who would “not allow” her to enter the school lavatory “without a black eye, a bloody nose, or [being] stabbed.” Sarah wasn’t sure what to do: “Finally one day I got sick of it. Finally one day I decided it was enough. This was bullshit. I’m going to the ladies’ room. I have every right as much as they do. I continue to try to mind my own business. I decided I’m not gonna speak about it any more. I’m gonna do it. . . . I decided I was gonna put my makeup on.”

Sarah’s decision was sparked not by a sense of racial injustice but by her emerging adolescent sexuality, what she termed “new thinking about boys.” She decided that she needed access to the ladies’ room to remove her leggings and straighten her skirt (“put your skirt down right”) and to fix her makeup (“a little mascara, not too much makeup, but enough”) in order “to be somebody.” When she entered, seven African American girls verbally harassed her: “And Jessie said, ‘Well, you going to have to fight.’ I said, ‘Yeah, I figured that’s all you are. I have to fight seven of you, one of me.’ And I never wanted to start none of this crap to begin with.” This incident settled a racial grid on Sarah’s life. Jessie, one of the African American girls, had been her friend but now regarded her in a racial way that made them antagonists. “We’re not friends anymore. Why not? Because I’m a honky now.” A fight ensued and Sarah was stabbed—presumably by one of the African American girls, though her story did not make this point clear.

This theme, established in the elementary school drama, recurs in three more episodes in Sarah’s story: as a high school student, as a young working woman, and as a new mother. Each time, Sarah contends, her efforts to maintain racial harmony were thwarted by African Americans who reacted to her solely on the basis of color. Although similarly structured, each episode conveyed Sarah’s growing sense of racial, and racist, awareness, demonstrating a racial “learning” culled from prior episodes.

In high school, for example, Sarah portrays herself as trying to maintain her distance from the African American students in her school (“I was cool with a couple of them”). Again, circumstances—this time, the changing racial demographics of her high school—intervene to prevent her strategy from working: “Everything was fine until more moved in.” Again, she portrays herself as unfairly cast in sharply racist terms (“Then I became a nobody. Then I was like I was a honky”) and forced into racial action: “Enough is enough. I gotta do what I gotta do. . . . It got to a point I had to fight.” In this way personal narratives absorbed the structure of a racist ideology that depicts the world as sharply divided between friend and foe and history as controlled by enemies.

Accounts like Sarah's share with other conversion stories a retrospective construction of self, a creation of autobiography. They impart an order to what otherwise might seem a disorderly, even chaotic, series of life events and decisions.³⁰ Moreover, they accord intent, calculation, and meaning to radical changes in identity.

Racist conversion stories fashion autobiography by relying on clues from earlier experiences to explain the present racist self. They thereby accord an essential authenticity to the racist self, making current racist ideas seem to be an expression of lifelong inclinations:

I was like really angry when I was about fourteen, right before I started getting involved with white power. And then in the past couple of years, I mean, I study a lot and I kind of changed from, like, anger to, like, pride. And now I'm proud of race [rather than only] being angry about society.

[When I found] the pro-white movement from my cousins and then started thinking, you know, that they had a lot of good stuff to say, I knew [it was true] that race mixing hurts not only society, but it hurts the offspring of it.

The emergent self becomes defined as the normal and true:

I met with these Klan guys five or six times. . . . They started coming to the house. We went to some rallies. After I started meeting these people I was just amazed how normal they were. It drove me crazy, the things I was excluded from [earlier] since I wasn't a member.

Along with their parallels to other accounts of conversion, racist conversion stories also have unique aspects. These usually reflect the secretive and semi-illegal nature of many racist groups as well as their marginality. For example, none of the racist women mention an obligation to evangelize about the specifics of their conversion experiences, as other converts commonly do. Most racist women are interested in bringing other Aryans into the racist movement, but they do not describe their own experiences of transformation when trying to persuade others to join. Thus one woman commented that she recruited fifteen friends into Nazism "by simply telling them the facts about world affairs." A Christian Identity adherent took a similarly impersonal approach to recruiting friends into the movement: "I gave them literature and books to read and talked to them about white history, pride in your race, and related issues."

Furthermore, racist accounts rarely draw on the motifs of self-effacement common in other conversion stories. Racists, unlike former alcoholics who often talk of “hitting bottom,” do not describe being forced by circumstance to admit that their life is on the wrong track. Nor does the idea of being forced to admit something about oneself to others, a common motif in the coming-out stories of lesbians and gay men, surface in the talk of racist women. Although they present their former (nonracist) lives as incomplete or bad, they rarely portray those earlier selves as unstable or off-balance, as those describing experiences of religious conversion often do.³¹ And they convey little sense of the self-abasement in awe of a greater power that structures accounts of conversion to religion or sobriety. Instead, many racist women tell stories of efforts at self-empowerment through activism, even though, as I discuss below, few conclude that those efforts have in fact succeeded.

Stories of Being a Racist

While stories of becoming a racist situate new racist commitments as rational outcomes of an unfolding self, stories of *being* a racist tell of the present and future racist self. In “becoming” stories, both the conclusion and the major themes are fixed by current identities, but “being” stories are more open. The future, an extrapolation from the present, can take more than one form.

For racist women, these two kinds of stories are quite different. Their accounts of becoming a racist are filled with action, agency, and self-empowerment. They cast life as movement, direction, and change. These tales focused on racial conversion acknowledge previous mistakes and racial blindness; but at their core, they are full of self-satisfaction and zeal. They proclaim that only through racial commitment can an authentic self—a coherent, true identity—be found. Joining a racist group is an accomplishment, a task of self-completion.

In contrast, stories of being a racist—stories of now and the future—are passive and guarded. Although some women, especially those who are very young or in white power skinhead groups, talk of organized racism as a means of empowering themselves, most speak with less assurance and even describe the personal toll of being in racist groups. Their stories of becoming a racist contain a sense of possibility, but their stories of being a racist are defeatist.

That negative tone is surprising, for in the genre of political testimonies—on the left or right—we typically find great excitement. Even

contemporary racist activists, whose racist commitments stigmatize them and marginalize them politically, usually appear in published accounts as adventurous or spirited. There can be great personal fulfillment in racist political action; as the social psychologist Raphael Ezekiel comments, "Organizing is the leader's jones. He has to have it. Like every jones, it is his world, his lover, his identity. Without it he is nothing; when engaged, he is God."³²

Such accounts, however, focus almost entirely on men. The sense of satisfaction widely observed among male racist leaders and evident in the self-aggrandizing autobiographies published in racist propaganda is rarely found among women. These women present racial "enlightenment" in terms of passive resignation at best, and more often with despair—as a burden, an onerous responsibility, an unwanted obligation.³³ They discuss their racial mission with little bluster and almost no swagger. In contrast to the male members of the British National Front studied by Ezekiel, who were eager to impart the fascists' party line to others, the racist activist women I interviewed were reluctant to describe political knowledge as preferable to ignorance. As one Nazi group member told me, "It's painful, it hurts, it's all-consuming when you have the knowledge." Another said flatly, "If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't want to know anything." A member of an Aryan supremacist group commented, "It's hard feeling this duty to alert other people."³⁴

Although almost one-half of the women said that they had tried to recruit others into the movement, nearly all were hesitant, even negative, about enlisting immediate family members, especially their own children (whether those children were real or only prospective). As one Nazi survivalist stated, "I won't teach my children to be political . . . I don't want them to have that burden." A Nazi skinhead declared that she did not want her children to be active racists, though her husband did: "It's too much responsibility. I want them to have the knowledge, but I don't want them to have to go through what I have gone through. What maybe I still will go through." An incarcerated white supremacist similarly cited the danger of being a racist, saying that she was trying to make sure that her son did not become involved because "the house would be burned down overnight." A Klanswoman said that she "wouldn't encourage anyone to join—it's just something I did."

Many seemed ambivalent about recruiting outside their own family as well. When I asked one Klanswoman whether she brought her friends to Klan meetings, she told me that she did not, because "they don't like to go out at night." Questioned about whether she recruited among the

young people who hung out at her house, another woman said that she did not, because “young people today have no stick-to-it-iveness. If some little thing turns up that just doesn’t suit them, they’re quitters.” Most efforts to recruit were portrayed as casual efforts, such as “sharing literature and pro-white books” or “introducing friends to some people involved with the movement.”

Even women who brought their children to racist events could show surprisingly little determination that they should become activist adults.

[I took] them to the dedication of the white race. . . . We dressed the kids up in fatigues and little hats because I didn’t have time to make little robes, and we took them and we had them dedicated [to white supremacism. . . . It’s my responsibility to train these two [but] they can make their own choice when they come of age.

I hope my children will be involved or at least understand why their father and I are involved but I will not force anything on my children.

I really can’t say whether or not my children will join [our Nazi group]. They will be raised National Socialist with racial pride, family values, and morals.

Racist activist women attempt to reconcile this personal reluctance with their ideological commitment to recruit in one of two ways. Some simply hope that racial separation will increase sufficiently that by the time their children are adults, they will be able to live in an all-white world without incurring the costs and risks of racial activism.

I want them to have a strong opinion. If we can get into a community where they can just live their lives and not have to be political activists, I think that would be great.

I wouldn’t want them to get political . . . I really believe that it would be better if people . . . had the right to live with other people who were just white people.

Others reason that once taught that nonwhites are different, their children will naturally segregate themselves by race as adults. A midwestern Nazi whose house is festooned with disgusting and violent images of African Americans and Jews spoke disingenuously but revealingly of her children, “I don’t teach them hatred of other races, but I do teach them that we are definitely different.” Similarly, a white supremacist whose racist husband is serving a prison term for assaulting an African Amer-

ican man described with remarkable vagueness how she educates her daughter about the races: "My daughter understands. She knows she's a special person. . . . It's the little things. When she didn't know what a black kid was, I explained that she's different because of her color, to let her know that she shouldn't be involved with nonwhites. I don't push her to believe any beliefs."

In addition, many women took pains to deny their own racial activism. Even some who were in minor leadership roles claimed that they were not activists, or that they tried not to be "too active," or that they were active only when it was "necessary for survival." As a prominent Aryan supremacist commented when discussing her own affiliation with a violent racist group, "I was in kind of an unaware state [when I joined]." Some described their work as "very limited" or "only helping out." Others denied that their work had an effect outside "its own little boundaries."

There was a sharp contrast between these women's descriptions of their groups and of themselves. Most claimed that their racist group was making great strides, "getting stronger," "attracting new members," or on the brink of "awakening the white race." Such exaggeration of strength is a tactic used by racist groups to intimidate opponents, and these women easily slipped into the propaganda they had been trained to spout. But when they spoke of their own roles in the racist movement, few sounded so heroic; instead, they used passive and even dreamlike language.³⁵ One Klanswoman said of her time in an earlier group, "I knew what went on but it just seemed like something you'd see in a movie or read in a book."

There are two reasons for this difference in tone. These women, as individuals, feel that they are the victims of unjust public condemnation. A white separatist complained that fear of losing her job made her hide her real feelings about African Americans and Jews. Another said that "people think I'm full of hate." A Nazi protested that she didn't "like the way people view me as a hater." An Aryan supremacist told me, "People look at us as though we are sick, as though we are the problem of society." Seemingly oblivious to her group's efforts to "rid America of blacks and Jews," one woman complained that she "could no longer go to certain stores downtown without people [saying], 'Oh, Nazi-redneck get out of here. You're a Nazi. We don't want you in here.'" Another woman, after detailing her work on behalf of white supremacy, complained that she felt uncomfortable in her church when she heard "people talking, whispering behind our backs" about her Klan

allegiance. Others felt that they were stigmatized unfairly because earlier racist groups had such bad reputations. A middle-aged woman, for example, insisted to a friend that “her Klan” was not violent. Her friend, she explained, “was comparing us [the Klan] with the Klan of the 1800s and it’s totally different . . . ’cause we have never burnt a cross in anybody’s yard, we have never hung anybody.” Such comments are consistent with these women’s general sense that participating in racism has been costly for them personally, even if it has bolstered a larger racist agenda. Several spoke of the racist movement absorbing too much of their time, leaving too little for their children and family. Others resented the compromises they had made—hiding their activist lives from co-workers and bosses, having to “conform to earn a living,” being “black-listed from any professional positions.”

Many women feel that they have been unfairly hurt by others in the movement. They strive to distance themselves from those they see as more extreme, simultaneously claiming, as did one Klanswoman, that their actions are “no different than being in the Girl Scouts” and that “most of the [other] people in the movement have too much hate.” In the same vein, a skinhead told me of a woman racist leader who “used to tell me [that] people that had brown hair and brown eyes [like me] were just filth and trash and wasn’t worthy of being around. She really scared me.” They thus see themselves as victimized by those within their own movement, particularly by certain men. Their descriptions of these men echo the stereotypes of racists held by those in mainstream society; they criticize them as “your Joe Six-pack,” as “dumb enough to walk down the street with a swastika on their T-shirt yelling at black people,” as “idiots that don’t know what they are talking about,” or even as “scumbags with fraudulent, unmotivated behavior.”

The women’s understanding of the politics of their movement also leads them to describe the movement and themselves in very different terms. Rather than burning with ideological passion or a desire to spread racist ideas, they feel hopeless about the “degenerate” society that surrounds them and the possibility of changing it. Male racial activists talk about their empowerment by racial knowledge and racial activism, boasting of their ability to change the world,³⁶ but for these women, racism is a politics of despair. They see activism solely as a means to protect their children or themselves from a troubled society that they have come to understand in racialized terms, but they give it little chance of success. As a white supremacist said, “I would like my future to be a

little-house-on-the-prairie picture . . . but it will not be like that. I think we'll be struggling my whole life . . . surrounded by immorality and corruption." These women's activism is defensive, giving them no self-satisfaction or sense of power. The racist movement promises to fend off what they see as threatening to engulf them and their families, but it promises and delivers little to them personally.

The emotional resignation found among these women activists is another indication of how they align their sense of self with the goals of the racist movement. To the extent that racist politics yields no obvious and tangible rewards to women activists, they construct their participation in the movement as involuntary, automatic, and unconscious. Making sense of racial politics by denying personal agency is a common response of those involved in political causes that are widely condemned; as the historian Gabriele Rosenthal found in a study of Germans who witnessed World War II but did not face persecution, such denial serves to normalize the consequences of involvement.³⁷ The stories of women racist activists, however, are not merely self-justifications. They convey both a feeling of hopelessness in the face of outside social or political forces and a sense of powerlessness to reconcile the contradiction between what the tellers see as the movement's lofty goals of Aryan supremacy and their actual experiences in the racist movement. Though all the women racial activists praise those goals, many derive little gratification from the process of working toward racial purity. It is in this sense that their resignation—their expressions of self-denigration, emotional pain, victimization, and lack of awareness—represents a gendered response to experiences within male-defined racist politics.

Such feelings make it difficult for the women to create a positive vision of their personal future in organized racism, despite being optimistic about the future of the movement. Thus, being a racist makes these women tense and uneasy. Some women talk positively of their life in racist groups and easily express pride in the racist movement, but most have great difficulty expressing pride in themselves as racist activists. When asked about her group (Skrewdriver), one white supremacist skinhead commented, "To me Skrewdriver means pride in my race and pride in my womanhood."³⁸ But asked about herself, another skingirl of about the same age answered: "I'm proud of my [racist group] family and what they've done and how I'm a part of them and what we're doing as a group. And any personal attributes that I'm particularly proud of, I mean, I'm not, I don't think I have very low self-esteem,

but at the same time, I don't usually go about thinking of what I've done."

The life stories of racist women sketch how they became involved in racist groups. Most entered through a personal contact—sometimes a friend or family member, but as often a mere acquaintance. The ways in which they met a racist activist varied as well. Some meetings were predictable from the people the women knew and the places they frequented, others simply happenstance. Some women described backgrounds that arguably made them receptive to the message of organized racism, while for others, racist activism was an abrupt departure from their earlier lives. Whatever their mode of entry into racist groups, each had to make adjustments to become a racist activist. For most, who had not grown up in racist families, these entailed substantial changes in their self-identities and the definition of their self-interests. They had to come to see themselves as part of a racist movement defending the interests of whites and Aryans.

Is this process of self-adjustment unique to racist women, or does it happen to racist men as well? It is difficult to know because there are no comparable life histories of male racist activists. However, several autobiographical sketches and biographical accounts of male racists hint at the gendered nature of racist activism.³⁹ Although men and women alike come into organized racism primarily through social networks, racist men, but not women, generally present themselves as agents of their own political enlightenment. Men talk of becoming a racist as the result of an internal process rather than the promptings by others. In "Why I Joined the Nazi Party," his declaration published in the *Storm-trooper*, Karl R. Allen describes his Nazism as an essential aspect of his inborn character: "Nazis are born not made. Nearly every man I've met here at [Nazi Party] National Headquarters has told me, 'I've been a Nazi all my life.' Some of them realized it right away; others waited a while. But all of them know, once they heard the call, that here is the Cause they were born to serve." He attributes his conversion to Nazism to an inner drive, a craving not satisfied in other ways: "Although I always stayed busy, I never felt a sense of 'accomplishment'—of doing something really worthwhile, other than earning money and making a living." But when he heard the words of a right-wing speaker, Allen recalls, it all "made sense"; he embarked on a program of study that led him to conclude that Hitler was right, and he applied for membership in the Nazi Party. Like the women recruits, Allen was converted to Na-

zism after contact with an individual, but his testimony focuses on the impact of the *ideas* he heard rather than of the speaker himself. The speaker is cast primarily as an instrument through which Allen's inner drive to embrace Nazi philosophy was fulfilled.⁴⁰

Similarly, John Gerhard of the American White Nationalist Party (AWNPN), in a piece titled "Leadership to Victory" and published in the party newsletter in the early 1970s, tells his conversion story: "The road which led to my joining the AWNPN started with a desire to save my country and race from what seems like inevitable destruction by our Marxist-Jewish enemies." Like some of the racist women, Gerhard recounts a personal quest for racial and political truth. His testimony takes the form of a journey, starting with George Wallace's presidential campaign in 1968; after a series of unsatisfactory memberships in increasingly extreme right-wing groups, he finally reaches his leadership post in the AWNPN. In his story, Gerhard is clearly the protagonist. It is his expressed "desire to save my country and race" that sets him on the road to racist activism, and his own determination brings him to his destination.⁴¹

More recently, the imprisoned white supremacist David Tate also presented himself as a self-motivated searcher for racial truth. He describes parents who were "middle class from upper-middle class families" but claims that as a youth he became "aware of 'racial' differences thanks to the hypocrisy of the system." Pointing with satisfaction to "the rise of the skinheads and increased participation of Aryan youth," Tate notes that in his youth, "there were few of my age who participated actively in the movement. I was a rare exception."⁴²

The racist self that men construct differs sharply from the resigned, nearly passive self that racist women present in their stories. Women's talk of bodily harm underscores the sense of vulnerability that justifies their entrance into organized racism, while their desire to safeguard their children from a life in organized racism highlights their sense of dissatisfaction with the life they have found there. Few men reveal similar conflicts: indeed, male racists, or at least male leaders, experience the racist movement as a positive, self-aggrandizing opportunity. For women, becoming a racial activist requires adopting a racist self that is fraught with complications, a self that many ultimately find unsatisfactory. In the next chapter, I turn from discussing the individual racist identities that women come to adopt to examining how women acquire collective racist identities: that is, how they develop a sense of themselves as participants in a larger white racist movement.

WHITENESS

Late in the afternoon, after a long interview full of vitriolic attacks on Jews, African Americans, immigrants, and a host of other groups, Susan turned our conversation to her conflicted feelings about being white. A longtime member of a small but highly visible Nazi group on the West Coast, she pondered why she had remained active in the racist movement despite what she regarded as unprovoked assaults by antiracist groups and investigations by the government: “The masses of whites that are so brainwashed have convinced me to stay with the cause and to struggle to reeducate them. Our race is so guilt-ridden and ashamed of its own accomplishments and that is amazing. We [i.e., her group] have received hate mail and a good portion of it claimed to be from whites that said, ‘I am white and ashamed,’ [and] ‘I take no pride in being white,’ [and] ‘I was born white, not by my choice.’” With scorn tempered by sympathy, Susan described “the masses of whites” as lacking a sense of white pride and racial ability. Their racial quiescence, she noted, was imperiling the race. Against all evidence, Susan saw whites as an endangered race, facing demographic and cultural extinction brought by social institutions that she decried as “blatantly anti-white”: “The masses of white folks have been stripped of their culture, heritage, history, and pride. That is why we do the things that we do—to educate, to instill a sense of pride in these people, to offset the effect of the regular mainstream media which is blatantly antiwhite. Whites are the true endangered species. We are less than 9 percent of the world’s

population. We are the ones in danger of dying out in one or two generations.”

Susan’s contorted views of whites are typical of those in organized racist groups. Her ambivalence toward the “masses of white folks” starkly illustrates the contradictory blend of concern and antipathy that underlies the peculiar ideas about whiteness held by racist activists. To become a white racist, it is necessary to identify with whites as a racial collectivity. Nevertheless, organized racists, like other marginalized and highly stigmatized groups, come to disdain and even loathe outsiders—including the majority of whites.

To white supremacist activists, other whites at best are racially apathetic, at worst embrace racial tolerance. Most regard whites not in their movement as holding a problematic mix of admirable and deplorable beliefs. For example, when a middle-aged woman told me of her personal racial genealogy, her account of how pride and respect for her European background prompted her to join the Klan—her story’s ostensible theme—was complicated by anger at the perceived rigidity, sexism, and “political correctness” of her racial ancestors and contemporaries. “As a woman, as a descendant of Nordic-Teutonic tribes,¹ as an above-average person,” she explained, “first I was brought up by my paternal grandmother’s mid-Victorian bylaws, as fed to her daughter-in-law, my mother. Then by later immigrants’ children such as my college housemates and in-laws. Then in a male-dominated society. And presently by a politically correct regime wherein truth may not be told if it denigrates another race.”

Comments like these raise the question of how racist activists understand and use ideas about whiteness. What moves someone beyond the construction of an individual racist self to a *collective* racial identity?² In particular, how is the self constructed as an actor in a racist movement—as a *white racist activist*? Among the women I interviewed, that collective identity rests on two foundations: their identification with a larger racial community of whites and their identification with efforts to implement white racial agendas. These two bases—white and activist—make their identity complex and often contradictory. They must accept whiteness as a unifying racial identity to which political commitment is possible, even when the boundaries of whiteness as a racial category are indistinct and perplexing. They also must believe in the efficacy of a racist activism that both depends on and sharpens the contrast between whites who are committed to action on behalf of racial preservation and those who are racial free riders or even disloyal to a

white agenda. For racist activists, other whites are simultaneously allies and the most threatening traitors.

IDENTIFYING AS WHITE

Toni Morrison writes of a character in an Ernest Hemingway novel: “Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so.”³ That whiteness goes unremarked by its possessors is one of the most striking conclusions of scholarship in the emerging field of “white studies.” In a white-dominated society, whiteness is invisible. Race is something that adheres to others as a mark of otherness, a stigma of difference. It is not perceived by those sheltered under the cloak of privilege that masks its own existence.

The widespread equation of racial identity with culture in modern U.S. society means that majority culture, like majority race, is unmarked. If minority culture is labeled as distinctive or exotic—the cultural “other” defined by “ethnic” food, dance, and clothing—then white culture is normative and thus unseen. For this reason, those who identify as whites can see themselves as lacking any racial culture. In the innovative ethnography of whiteness by the sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, a woman—whose “cultural positioning seemed to her impossible to grasp, shapeless and unnameable”—talks of being in a “cultural void.”⁴

Lacking an explicit sense of white culture or even of whiteness, majority populations rarely are aware of the racial politics that benefit them. Political agendas that favor whites, especially middle-class whites, are seldom acknowledged as racial in their intent or consequences. They are presented as defending goods that are ostensibly nonracial, such as quality schools, property values, equal access to employment, or neighborhood safety. Whiteness is unmarked because of the pervasive nature of white domination. Its very invisibility, in turn, thwarts challenges to white racial privilege.

Unlike most whites, members of organized racist groups have to be highly conscious of being white. For them, whiteness is a central and conscious aspect of identity, shaping how they see the world and how they choose to act toward others. Whiteness is a central topic of conversation in racist groups and a focus of their propaganda. Racist activists see whiteness as highly remarkable—and they often remark on it. Rather than being a peripheral or unnoticed feature of the social land-

scape, it is for them a central organizing principle of social and political life.

The subject of white racial identity is treated in nearly every publication of the racist movement. Christian Identity groups, in particular, place great emphasis on promoting a sense of racial distinctiveness and superiority among whites, condemning as “whoredom” all forms of intercultural exchange, integration, and marriage or dating. In her column “For Women Only,” which appears in the Christian Identity newsletter *Scriptures for America*, Cheri Peters, wife of CI leader Pete Peters, recalls how her grandmother “stressed the importance of *white* skin.” In explaining her difficulty in understanding why white girls desired to look like Mexicans, Cheri cites her grandmother’s admonition against tanning: “She told me to be proud of my white skin. . . . In today’s society my grandmother would be what is called a ‘racist.’ If only we had more ‘racist’ grandmothers today.”⁵

The visibility of whiteness also is heightened for racist activists because they see it as a marker of racial *victimization* rather than racial dominance. The racial self-consciousness of white supremacists grows out of the notion that whites have endured oppression in the past and present. Examples of such purported discrimination against whites are legion in racist propaganda and in the talk of white racist activists. A white power skingirl complained to me that “whites aren’t allowed a ‘white man’s America’ or white scholarship fund. We are not granted permission for a white history month.” Her solution? “To execute, to do away with both Jews and government.” A member of a militant Christian Identity compound was less specific but no less vehement, telling me that “white Christian people are persecuted for being white, persecuted for believing that God created them different, created them superior.” Even slavery is incorporated into the litany of historical atrocities suffered by whites. As an older neo-Nazi woman put it: “There was white slaves. Way before there was black slaves. So they [blacks] are not the only ones that did without. . . . White people from Nordics and Vikings came over on their ships. The white people went through a lot of hell to exist to this day.”

Boundaries of Whiteness

The ideas that racist activists share about whiteness are more conscious, elaborated, and tightly connected to political action than those of main-

stream whites, but they also reflect the views of whiteness dominant in mainstream culture. Whiteness is generally (and paradoxically) defined more precisely by who is *excluded* than who is *included*. Whites are those who are *not nonwhite*: those who are not racially marked, those who are not clustered together to form a category of racial minority. Such reasoning is seen in the words of a very young Nazi who claimed her identity of whiteness only gingerly, embracing membership in the race primarily as a means of asserting dominance over others: "I don't like most white people, but I choose white people over niggers, spics, chinks, japs, vietnamese, wops, whatever."⁶

Scholars in the new field of white studies find that whiteness is defined by its boundaries. In her ethnography of white ethnic communities in the United States, the anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo argues that white ethnics locate themselves racially by contrasting themselves against those they perceive as undesirable racial extremes—the bloodless modernity that they associate with elite white culture, on the one hand, and the primitive wildness that they regard as emblematic of African American culture, on the other. In a similar vein, Frankenberg concludes from her interviews focused on growing up white in America that "whiteness can by definition have no meaning: as a normative space it is constructed precisely by the way in which it positions others at its borders. . . . Whiteness is in this sense fundamentally a relational category."⁷

In determining whiteness, borders are more significant than internal commonality. Over time whiteness has been constructed, in the words of the legal theorist Cheryl Harris, as "an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded."⁸ If we view whiteness as defined by its borders, we can see clearly how ideas about race are spatial, how social space is divided along racial lines. The importance of space can be discerned in the language of most whites, but it is particularly evident in descriptions by racist activist women of their efforts to enforce white privileges. For example, one Klanswoman told me a story of racial contestation over space involving a new woman minister in her church: "The first thing that happened was she went to the colored section and she started bringing the colored into the church. Well, there's no objection if you're going into missionary work. But she brought them here into the church. I stopped going. I object to them coming into my community. They can have their own. Otherwise no."

Racist groups support not only racial separation but also absolute racial hierarchies of domination and subordination, superiority and in-

feriority. They seek a division of racial space that is vertical as well as horizontal, thereby ranking as well as distinguishing among racial groups. A white supremacist boasted of the community where she grew up in the deep South: "There's not a black or Hispanic. There's really not. They're not allowed there. They get harassed to the point where they're leaving. It is racist. I mean extreme racist."

Contradictions of Whiteness

Although white racist activists must adopt a political identity of whiteness, the flimsy definition of whiteness in modern culture poses special challenges for them. In both mainstream and white supremacist discourse, to be white is to be distinct from those marked as nonwhite,⁹ yet the placement of the distinguishing line has varied significantly in different times and places. Nineteenth-century Irish immigrants to the United States, in the words of the historian Noel Ignatiev, "became white" as a result of prolonged racial and political struggle; Jewish immigrants followed a similar historical trajectory, though with only partial success. In contrast, for Mexican Americans, at least in western states, the likelihood of being included in the racial category of "white" decreased through the twentieth century.¹⁰ These historical outcomes suggest that whiteness is a racial identity in flux, a racial category always in danger of challenge and modification. Oddly, whiteness is at once intensely significant and ultimately meaningless.¹¹ In her scholarship, Harris points to the lack of any "inherent unifying characteristic" in whiteness, an absence that leaves its boundaries representational, political, and fluid.¹² Like the boundaries of emerging nation-states,¹³ the borders of race can be indistinct, difficult to police, and contested.

The fluidity of race is acknowledged differently among white supremacist groups. Traditionally, racist groups in the United States have embraced xenophobia, nationalism, and viciously anti-immigrant political agendas. For them, whiteness has rested on national origin as well as skin color. In recent years, however, a number of organized racists have come to support the idea (still resisted by many) of a transnational racism or Pan-Aryanism based on international commonalities of whiteness, anti-Semitism, or Aryan heritage.¹⁴ In this new conception, whiteness can transcend national borders but still be fixed as "Aryan." Racist activists also differ over how broadly the idea of whiteness can be stretched within the United States. The propaganda of racist groups presents whites and nonwhites, Aryans and Jews, as diametrically op-

posite and clearly defined groups. In private conversations and in my interviews, however, racist activists often struggle with such sharp delineations. For many, distinguishing the borders between whites and American Indians and between whites and Jews is especially problematic.

Surprisingly, some racist activist women regard American Indian ancestry to be authentically white, even though contemporary American Indians are maligned and victimized by racist group members. This curious notion reflects a belief in American Indians as “noble savages”—primitive but pure—that augments claims about the long victimization of whites.¹⁵ If Indians are “really white,” and if Indians collectively have been historically victimized, then members of the white race have an additional set of racial grievances. As one white supremacist related:

I'm fucked anyway because I'm a minority. We whites are a minority. I was denied my Indian heritage and I did grow up as a white person. Denied by my father. I wish I had been raised as a Cherokee. . . . [The] reason for my white supremacy [is] because, okay, whoever brought the niggers were assholes, because this was Indian territory. This was their country. White man took it over. And I'm from Indians, so it pisses me off.

The relationship between Jews and racist whites, though more overtly confrontational, is similarly fraught with ambiguities. As the next chapter details, Jews are almost uniformly perceived by organized white supremacism today as the central enemy. Virtually all racist group propaganda grossly caricatures Jews as a victimizing group immutably in battle with Aryans. Individual white supremacists concur: without exception, every racist woman I interviewed took pains to voice her hatred and fear of Jews even when answering unrelated questions.

Yet many racist women activists find it a struggle to place Jews, who usually appear white, in a racial schema based primarily on the dichotomy between white and nonwhite. In this regard, Nazi ideologies fit awkwardly onto the rigid templates of race that underlie white supremacist ideologies in the United States. In written racist propaganda, these tensions are obscured by the virulent descriptions of Jews as a group apart, so treacherous as to be nearly nonhuman. But the private talk of racist activists makes more obvious that categorizing Jews is a problem. Some women claim that unstated physical similarities between Jews and whites uniquely position Jews to be racial spies or to enter into sexual relationships with Aryan whites. Others assert that Jewishness is some-

thing chosen, not given: it is a cultural pattern, a way of life, rather than a racial category. As one skingirl declared: "Jewishness is not a race and never [has] been a race. That's, a lot of people don't understand that. They follow the Jewish way of life. That's what it is. It's not racial."

In either case, Jews are seen by white supremacists as particularly loathsome precisely because their elusive racial designation gives them unwarranted access to whites. Lorraine, a neo-Nazi, contrasts what she sees as the mutable characteristics of Jews with the stable appearance of African Americans. Jews, she argues, can be observed "going Jewish," but blacks remain black: "There's a few Jews that are what they call 'Jew power' but very few, because Jews will like to mix. Jews especially like to go after the red hair and blue eyes. Why, I don't know, but this is very true. But if you see a Jewish person that's going Jewish, they look Jewish. They have the nose, they have the ears, they have the mouth."

The ambiguities of racial definition and boundary in the white supremacist movement coexist with a strong emphasis on racial commonality and racial loyalty. Members perceive the need to create and enforce racial unity in the face of splintered and contested ideas about whiteness and race.

IDENTIFYING WITH RACIST AGENDAS

Whiteness, which for most whites seems inconsequential or wholly invisible, is both embraced and regarded as highly significant by organized racists. For them, whiteness defines a community that, at least potentially, is unified and capable of being mobilized in the service of racial agendas. Yet the centrality of a common racial agenda to the white supremacist movement does not make it unproblematic for racist activists.

To accept the mobilizing potential of whiteness means envisioning whites as a racial community, much like the modern nation insofar as it is, as the historian Benedict Anderson suggests, "an imagined political community." Though nationalism is usually understood as "the awakening of nations to self-consciousness," Anderson characterizes it as the invention of nations "where they do not exist." So too is racist activism based on an imagined community of whites, on an ability to "visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves."¹⁶

Racist activists deliberately shape an imagined racial community of whiteness in myriad ways. One involves violent confrontation with

those marked as “nonwhite.” As I explore further in chapter 5, many racist activists believe that force can create a unitary, self-interested community of whiteness. They insist that a collectively accepted sense of white racial power can be generated through in-your-face aggression, the violent thrust of racist cultural spectacle, and terroristic acts.¹⁷ In a more subdued fashion, racist activists also seek to “imagine” into existence a community of self-conscious whites by creating white culture’s lineage. “Naming one’s race,” the philosopher David Theo Goldberg notes, presupposes a racial “self-recognition” in a racial lineage.¹⁸ Racist groups distribute flyers depicting the Christian nativity scene with Ku Klux Klan and Nazi members taking the place of shepherds and kings as witnesses to the birth of Christ and as heirs to the Christian vision. Such efforts aim to construct a white racist history, filling the void that racist activists see in mainstream white culture.¹⁹

Many racist women recount their personal history within a larger history of the white race. For some, naming racial lineage is a means of claiming a more honorable or glorious racial family tree. As an avid follower of National Socialism told me, “The word ‘Aryan’ means ‘noble.’ Therefore to be Aryan means to be noble. This is not something that is easy to do in current times.” Other women make their claims of white culture more defensively. They recoil at what they see as efforts to undermine white history and tradition. A Klanswoman recalled her horror at discovering that her son was being taught the contributions of African American leaders to U.S. history: “I was outraged. Me and my mom went down to the school and we talked to them [and I said] ‘I don’t care to learn both sides.’ . . . I’m upset that [my son] knows black history and he still doesn’t know his American history.”

Racial Loyalty

As they strive for racial community, some white supremacist activists come to rely on *strategic* definitions of whiteness. In contrast to mainstream whites, who tend to establish what the philosopher Marilyn Frye terms a “generously inclusive” definition of whiteness that embraces everyone not obviously nonwhite,²⁰ racist activists espouse a more restricted and hierarchical notion of whiteness. They reject what Frankenberg labels the “production of a white self innocent of racism” in favor of a white identity based on explicit loyalty to race and racism. Many racist women activists, to varying degrees, thus see race as unstable, a

product of political commitment as much as biology. Such strategic definitions are especially striking because they contrast sharply with racist propaganda that portrays race as fixed and biological.²¹ Research based solely on racist propaganda and public speeches necessarily overlooks this clash of views.

Consider the statement of Molly, a skinhead from a western state. In a rambling discussion, she referred to racial characteristics as arising from both biology (“racial blood”) and society (“environment”):

If you take a person of pure racial blood, that person is likely to be very healthy, very strong, have a good personality and outlook on life, if they are in their natural environment. By natural environment I simply mean any environment that is compatible to the one their race has been in for the many thousands of years that it has been around. If you put that same person into an alien environment, they become distrustful and in the lower evolved [races] they can become very violent.

Some racist activists embrace a twisted version of the idea, now a scholarly commonplace, that race is a social construction rather than a biological given, that the definition and boundaries of race are produced by social forces rather than by skin color or genetics.²² Such a logic is evident in a number of interviews in which racist women sought to distinguish someone’s *true* racial identity from his or her superficial racial markings. They described relying on a person’s actions to define race at least as much as on intransigent characteristics such as skin color or physical features.

The narrative of Virginia, a southern neo-Nazi, provided the starkest example of this construction of race. When she described her best friend, an African American man, she explained that because he was a confidant, he was “really white.” People who are “on your side” are necessarily white, Aryan, or Christian—regardless of their appearance. Having an interracial friendship thus did not disturb her racist identity: she assigned race on the basis of loyalty, not skin color.

My best friend was black. He says, “I’m not a nigger. I hate niggers.” He ended up being like my brother, my best friend, you know, everything. We were like this. [She put her fingers together.] . . . He wouldn’t even speak to his own family because he hated niggers. He dressed like us, talked like us, walked like us, hung out with us,

listened to our music, everything. . . . [He said,] "God played a dirty joke on me and put me in a black wet suit, but I'm totally, I'm all white inside." . . . He was really white.

In an even stranger twist, her African American friend was killed because of his color: two white men "out partying" gave him a ride from a gas station and then ran him over with their car after he asked to be let out.

They let him out of the car. They drove on and then [one white man] turned to his partner and he was like, "Hey, fuck that shit." And he turned around. And he went really purposely. . . . He full throttled the fucking pedal. He [i.e., her friend] got killed because of the fact that he was black. . . . I mean, he was really cool. And he was nineteen when he got killed and I was, like, I was devastated.

Conversely, for some racists, those who wrong you must be non-white, non-Aryan, or Jewish. This belief fuels the incessant search for white "race traitors"—that is, white-appearing persons who act to subvert white racist agendas. A telephone "hate line" aimed at Aryan women who "have abandoned the last of the Aryan heathen warriors in their darkest hour of need" is typical of the venomous sentiment directed toward those deemed to be race traitors:

Whatever the case or cause may be, may you die a slow and painful death. . . . You bastards of the Aryans have chosen the side of the enemy only because you fear losing with your own race.

You're also in favor of the Zionist overlords and their lackeys, therefore you deem it necessary to fight against your own kind.

*Do you have anything to offer your race, and earth, white women? Or are you a cowardly wench that seeks a heinous life of ease? Make your decision. We have. We know the odds against us are very great, but we will die on our feet before we live on our knees.*²³

Similarly, a white power skinhead girl writing in a racist newsletter decries the "non-White loving baldies who call themselves skinheads [and] would swear 'till death that they are White warriors, yet their actions are truly contradictory."²⁴ In a pamphlet titled *White Genocide Manifesto*, published by his "14 Word Press," the imprisoned white supremacist leader David Lane pointedly cautions:

Let those who commit treason with the Zionist destroyer, or sit on the fence, be aware. If we are successful in our goal, expressed in the 14 WORDS: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for

White children” then your treachery will be appropriately rewarded. If not, and the White race goes the way of the dinosaurs, then the last generation of White children, including yours, will pay for your vile complicity at the hands of the colored races who will inherit the world.²⁵

Even Christianity can be perceived by some racist activists as traitorous to whites. Although some women say that their racism reflects true Christianity, others decry most organized religion. They complain, variously,

Christianity is a slave religion that worships the Jew.

The dominant religion in the once-white countries in almost all of its various cults and divisions is determinedly pushing race mixing and the brotherhood of universal mankind. You cannot take back a religion, if indeed it ever was ours, from a billion nonwhite and brain-dead race traitors.

Judeo-Christians and humanists are agents of the destruction of the white race and Western civilization. They are all now discriminated against by the Jewish overlords due to the ancient hatred of Western civilization from the conquests and occupations of ancient Palestine by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

This concern with race traitors created problems in my encounters with racist women. Although every woman I contacted for interviews assumed that I had white skin,²⁶ many were less sure about my racial loyalty and thus less ready to trust that I was “really white.” One of these suspicious women was Emily, a leader of a white power skinhead group. Throughout the interview, Emily’s language was full of racial expletives and obscenities. Only with difficulty could I keep her focused on her life history. When I began my standard cautionary speech about the ideological gulf between us, Emily cut me off. She repeatedly hurled racial challenges at me and ignored my efforts to answer. When, for example, I asked about groups with which she had been associated, she replied: “White supremacy, neo-Nazi, the belief in anarchy. I can’t stand Jews. Are you a Jew? I can’t stand Jews because they’re the ones that said ‘Crucify Jesus,’ okay? I don’t believe in government because it’s mostly ruled by the fucking Jews anyway.” Emily’s demand “*Are you a Jew?*” is bracketed between statements of her antipathy toward what she fears I might secretly be: “*I can’t stand Jews.*” Yet she does not wait

for an answer. If people can adopt and change racial allegiances, racial identities, and even racial categories through their actions and beliefs, no verbal response can suffice. The truth can be revealed only through my actions toward her and others like her.

Emily's disdain for race traitors emerged again when she explained why she agreed to let me interview her for this research while a white supremacist friend, Karen, declined. "I think it's really fucked up that Karen would tell all her shit about white supremacy and all the things that go along with it, yet when me and her were sitting in front of . . . a black lady Karen stands up [and says], 'I'm not saying shit about my Aryan beliefs.' And walked out." Emily viewed both Karen and me as not white because of our cowardice about expressing white ideas in front of an African American: "At least I ain't ashamed. . . . I'll tell them [African Americans] about what I think, you know. I'm the only one that is white [and] open about it And it pisses me off about you. The two of you, deep down, you suck up to niggers."

Thus, the notion of whiteness—presented as an undifferentiated category of racial identification and loyalty in the propaganda of most racist groups—is contradictory and internally stratified in the minds of individual racist activist women. A Nazi woman seized on the idea of "tribe" to describe how there could be such variability among a single race of whites: "I see myself as a kind of Aryan tribalist. One tribe can vary a lot from the next."

Racial Responsibility

Becoming a white racist activist involves more than adopting a particular definition and collective identity of whiteness. It also requires belief in the necessity of taking action on behalf of the white race, the adoption of a political identity as an *activist*. To create racial and organizational allegiance, racist groups deliberately set out to instill this aspect of collective identity in new recruits.²⁷ Women in racist groups commonly express their activist conviction as a principle of "taking responsibility" for the white race. One neo-Nazi woman framed the idea of racial responsibility in vague but nonetheless menacing terms: "I think that you can't really blame other people for the predicament you're in. The white people in the United States need to take responsibility for their action and if there are people who are troubling them, they *can take care of them*, it's not beyond their power."

If loyalty to race forms the boundaries of whiteness, then those who

accept the mantle of racial responsibility display a higher form of racial consciousness. When women discussed levels of hierarchy within their racist groups, several commented that elite positions, such as those held by self-designated “storm troopers” or within “revolutionary underground units,” belonged to those who were “most conscious of being white people” or who were most aware “of the need to have a movement on behalf of the white race.” A middle-aged Klanswoman recalled that her father “was part of [a racist group] for many years. It was an elite group. Just a very few were allowed [in]. Others had to be part of an auxiliary.” Such higher-level activists are, as an older skinhead put it, “people with definite ideas rather than wishy-washy ideas. People who have the same values that I have.” Although some women deny that they have any power in the racist movement, others place themselves, ideologically at least, within this racial elite. A neo-Nazi claimed that she was constantly treated unjustly because of her white skin, but “I don’t cry about it. I take revenge.” A Klanswoman characterized the Klan movement as “a struggle in which only the strongest [i.e., like herself] can survive.”

Those who are disloyal to whiteness—that is, those who openly work against the interests of the white race—are considered not white. But even among those regarded as white, there are some who shirk their racial responsibility, who do not act in accordance with their whiteness. In the written propaganda of the racist movement they are “the ill-informed, degenerate brainwashed section of the Aryan race, which is a considerable amount, [who] will shut their windows, lock their doors, and turn on the Cosby show while their kids are doing their part by reading books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. But then whose fault is that the Aryan race is the only race who’s ashamed of their ancestry?”²⁸ In interviews, racist women portray them as “whites that have been stripped of their culture, heritage, history and pride.”

The movement is growing stronger . . . it is gaining more respect because we ourselves are weeding out the useless and weak. Let them depend on someone else to protect them.

We’re trying to wake people up. We’re trying to make people realize who they are and the place that they need to take in their society. The biggest problem is that a lot of them don’t want to be woken up.

Even worse are those who are “racially aware” but choose not to act on behalf of the white race. Many racist women disparaged such whites:

The individuals that talk a good line, but don't do anything. They want to complain about the government or the new world order or minorities, et cetera, but try to get them to contribute a few bucks or to put out [racist group] business cards or flyers and they will always have an excuse not to. Recently, I had an older man tell me, "I'm too goddamned old to get involved." I said, "No. That is a lot of crap. What you mean is that you are too old to be white." It is the b.s.'ers and the hopeless kosher conservatives [closeted anti-Semites] that bug me most.

The rich old conservative farts won't give up their money [to racist groups]. Because the only thing they are interested in conserving is their money, not their race.

The life story of Doris, an activist in a small underground Nazi group, illustrates how other whites are gauged by the yardstick of racial responsibility. Doris was involved with a group whose main ideological principle was Aryan solidarity, which members used to argue for the exclusion of non-Aryan immigrants from the United States. Her group's emphasis on a social, spiritual, and intellectual hierarchy among and within races—with activist Aryans regarded as the highest stage of human evolution—is reflected in Doris's judgment of white society.

Early in the interview, Doris urged me to differentiate between her group and others in the racist movement. Despite her group's explicit embrace of Nazism and Holocaust denial, Doris insisted that they were "less focused on hate" than other white supremacist groups: "The other ones are vicious and they are not philosophical at all." Doris's underlying belief in a gradation among whites extended even to the white supremacist movement, and she believed that the followers of her own group were among the most intellectually sophisticated and highly evolved. Far from glorifying the racist movement, as the literature of her group does, Doris had a very negative opinion of most racist activists: "I think most of the people who call themselves part of the movement are people who have been attracted to a stereotype, what they think it means. . . . They just act like white trash."

Doris's views of racial responsibility also affected the dynamics of her interview. Not long into our conversation, she interrupted herself and commented: "I'm just assuming you're my [kind of] white. I could be wrong here." When I responded with a quizzical look, she continued, "It [whiteness] covers a lot of territory, you know. There's all kinds." Later, Doris tried to assess my commitment to her kind of whiteness by

discussing an acquaintance, a woman she described as having “had bad experiences with minorities” but being nonetheless unwilling to do anything about it. She characterized this woman as white but—because of her reluctance to act on behalf of white people—almost a traitor to whiteness, and Doris pointedly drew the connection to what she regarded as my ambiguous racial position. “White people who would never make a stand over any issue like race,” she continued, “are too afraid to have anyone call them a racist or get any bad publicity [even though] they do agree.” Again, the issue of whether I was a “race traitor” or a “race loyalist” hung over the interview, marking another possible gulf between us.

One obvious tactic used by racist groups attempting to nurture ideals of racial responsibility is to create what one scholar describes as “a cult of heroes and martyrs.”²⁹ White supremacist propaganda and internal documents routinely recite the names and biographical details of racist leaders. Moreover, white supremacist groups (with perhaps increasing frequency in recent years) time events and even terroristic acts to coincide with anniversaries of significant racist martyrs and heroes. Hitler’s birthday (April 20), the anniversary of the violent conflict between the white separatist Randy Weaver and federal agents in Ruby Ridge, Idaho (August 21–22), and the date of the bombing of the federal government office building in Oklahoma City (April 19) all have become occasions for commemoration and violence.

Despite this emphasis on heroes and martyrs, women racists express little interest in them. One prominent women’s neo-Nazi group circulates what they call an “Aryan Martyr’s Map,” which identifies where white supremacists died in battles with law enforcement officials, sanctified as places where “great men and women . . . gave their energy and their lives for the folks.”³⁰ But most women talk about notions of heroism and martyrdom abstractly, if at all, perhaps because honor and recognition in organized racism are reserved almost exclusively for men.³¹ Racist men in the movement’s rank and file compare themselves to white supremacist leaders, as “following in the path that Hitler set out” or as “carrying on the work that [an imprisoned member of a racist underground group] is not able to.” In contrast, racist women do not refer spontaneously to racial heroes outside of immediate family and comrades. They cited prominent figures only after I specifically asked them to identify people whom they saw as heroes. The most frequently named was Adolf Hitler—not surprisingly, given the prominence of Hitler books, pamphlets, and memorabilia in organized racist groups. It is

instructive, however, that Hitler alone was consistently named correctly. The second most commonly mentioned hero was Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess, although he was often referred to as Adolf Hess, Rudolf Hessian, or some other misnomer. Third was the American Nazi George Lincoln Rockwell, who was also called George Lincoln and Lincoln Rockwell. The only woman's name put forth (by two women) was that of Kathy Ainsworth, a schoolteacher and Klan member arrested for the 1968 bombing of a synagogue in Meridian, Mississippi, and later slain in a gunfight with authorities.³²

Racist women tend to discuss racial responsibility in terms of principles rather than individual racist heroes.³³ In a perverse way, they assert a racial "morality," based on faith in whiteness and loyalty to racist agendas rather than faith in God and commitment to mainstream religion. One explained, "My race is my religion to me. My race is first and foremost. In that sense, I guess I'm extremely religious. Christianity is a big lie." Some of the women I interviewed found validation in their perceived adherence to racist "morality." It affirms that they are doing the right thing, that their life has meaning. By conveying a sense of belonging to a collective struggle, it helps counter the feelings of resignation and despair that they experience as individuals. As discussed in chapter 1, many racist women express pride only in their groups, not in themselves, but some point to their racist activism as evidence of their personal worth. An East Coast skingirl told me that having "high morals" helped her recruit more people into organized white supremacism: "I'm proud of the fact that I'm a skinhead with a goal and high morals. I'm proud of being a part of what I feel so strongly about. With my education and morals, I can get people to talk about the movement and open their eyes without them dismissing me as an uneducated, nothing-going-for hick. I'm determined with a purpose and goal." A neo-Nazi woman similarly argued that her exemplary character would set a "good example" for others: "I am responsible in everything I do. I set goals for my life and can reach them. I am active in the pro-white movement without being a hypocrite. I practice what I preach and set a good example. I am preparing myself and my family for the future constantly."

Other women said that working on behalf of the white race gave them the sense that they were contributing to the world, that they were on the correct moral path. A Klanswoman commented: "I am proud of my lovely children. I enjoy my work. And I am proud that I am doing my part for my race." A racist skingirl claimed, "I am proud of my loyalty to my race because I could have race-mixed when I was younger

and lots of black men wanted to date me, but after seeing what happened to my girlfriends I knew that it was wrong to date outside of my race.” And a Christian Identity adherent told me: “I’m proud that I’m a white female who realizes what is happening to my people. I’m proud that I completed my education and will continue to educate myself. . . . I’m proud of the way I live my life and will continue to do so because it gives me strength and self-pride.”

The historian Glenda Gilmore reminds us that political rhetoric “can license people to do evil in the name of good.”³⁴ Certainly, finding morality in the service of racism is appalling; the claim falls far outside any reasonable standard of moral conduct. But it is important to recognize how and why racist women make such claims. The sense of moral worthiness that these women locate in the racist movement gives them a fervor for racist politics that helps compensate for the problems they experience in organized racism. Much like many women in very different social movements, racist women report finding more satisfaction in feeling selflessly engaged in a struggle for what they see as right than in the specific practical details of activism.

As they become part of the racist movement, women develop a collective racist identity that requires them to identify self-consciously as white, making explicit a racial identity that most whites take for granted. Unlike mainstream whites, racist activists are forced to acknowledge how fluid and imprecise the idea of “whiteness” can be. Jews and American Indians pose particular problems, being neither clearly “white” nor clearly “not-white.” Furthermore, racist activists are confronted with the reality that many whites, however defined, fail to support racist agendas. At best, they defend their racial position only casually; at worst, they are active race traitors. In contrast, racial activists must be racially loyal and racially responsible, ready to take personal risks to defend the white race. Faced with these complexities, racist activists define true whites by their actions. Those who act on behalf of the white race as a whole—and those who are steadfast personal friends—are white.

Racist men enjoy plenty of heroic images to cement their identities as racist activists—male racial warriors are stock figures of racist propaganda and there is a thriving cult of male racial martyrs. But women find the identity of “racist activist” more complicated. The racist movement provides them little glory or recognition. Instead, these women measure themselves against what they construct as a racialized moral

standard. They claim a measure of personal accomplishment when they work for the greater good of all whites. As we have seen, this sense of worthiness does not fully counter their disillusionment within the racist movement, yet it supplies one reason that women remain in racist groups. A second, external reason—the fear and loathing of racist enemies—is explored in the next chapter.