

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 “conducive, 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 supremacy, 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.