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Elaine Frantz Parsons. *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 400 S. ISBN 978-1-4696-2544-7.

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Only few organizations have been as strongly identified with the history of racial discrimination and vigilante violence in the U.S. as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In addition to the fear evoked through its political campaigns and raids the Klan's distinct repertoire of performances and symbolism have become so iconic that they found their way into the canon of popular culture reaching from novels and songs to computer games and movies. Therefore, it is only fitting that Elaine Frantz Parsons has written a book that presents the first years of the KKK from a distinctly cultural history perspective. Luckily, Parsons is not telling one overarching story of the Klan's emergence in Reconstruction America, but she draws her readers into a variety of storylines that mainly evolve around the public image of the Klan, the impact it had on people's lives in the North and the South as well as the political response to it. These narrative layers and perceptions open up a view on the effects of the Ku Klux Klan as a cultural phenomenon in post-Civil-War America.

Parsons claims to read sources about the Klan "through a lens of suspicion" (p. 19), which means that she suggests to read her archival materials both as traces of the Klan's activities and as constant attempts to create a narrative framework that would give meaning to acts of white violence in the South. Dealing with both the elements of chronicling the Klan and exaggerating its importance, the author is trying to fathom the impact of the Klan on different levels: physically, psychologically, politically – to name just a few interpretive layers Parsons addresses. Through this discursive method Parsons portrays the polarities of the Klan: as an organizational framework that also invited spontaneous participation; as widespread phenomenon that was also distinctly local; as a group of people that felt bound to a core of common tactics and goals but that was also diverse and open for a variety of interpretations. Thus, she is able to make four basic arguments about the Reconstruction KKK. First, Parsons claims that the Klan emerged in response to ideas and political priorities Northerners held towards the South. Second, the author shows how Southerners – through the action of the Klan – underwent a modernizing process that allowed them to appropriate and influence cultural forms of the North – thus creating spaces of Southern resistance through the means of parody and burlesque. Third, the Klan became an area of common political understanding in Northern and Southern states. It allowed to conceptualize violence, suppression or racism as contained, isolated and limited excesses of a Southern society on its way back to normality. Finally, the Klan was an arena of identity politics in the postwar South that performed and enacted the exclusion of freedpeople and the integration of former Confederates.

In her first five chapters she addresses the phenomenon from different angles. First, Parsons

starts out with a familiar theme. Picking up on her 2005 article about the performative qualities of KKK raids she analyzes the origins of the Klan within the framework of the carnivalesque and mysterious. Elaine Frantz Parsons, Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan, in: Journal of American History 92 (2005), pp. 811–836. By focusing on elements of popular culture such as costumes, parades and music the book shows how early Klansmen employed tactics of deception and ambiguity to hide their real intentions as well as to create a liminal space between play and violence. Hoods and coats did not only serve as means to disguise one's identity but also as props for performances that allowed the actors to act violently and, at the same time, distance themselves from their actions in the mode of drama and parody. In a post-war society, Klanspeople were, thus, able to foster a genuine political agenda, as Parsons shows in her second chapter. By carefully staging their attacks as symbolic violence (on top of the physical attacks) the Klan addressed different audiences. On the one hand, they established a new white manhood that pushed back against the 'obsolete' and 'outdated' framework of the Southern "gentleman" that had failed during the Civil War. To white audiences the use of parody, blackface and even cross-dressing were supposed to perform white domination over African Americans that was fueled by a core of inner whiteness and savagery. Against this backdrop, black audiences, on the other hand, were supposed to figure as timid, emotional and inferior bystanders and victims. As Parsons lays out in the following chapter, KKK attacks were, in that vein, sites of white community building and of putting black people in their supposed place, as disorderly, easy to manipulate and without any elites. Moreover, the author maps out how performance did not stop with putting on a hood. Her analysis of Congressional testimony interprets how different groups (Northern Republicans, Democrats and Freedpeople) used these hearings to create room to maneuver and shape their own narratives of a post-war society in the context of their own identities. In her fourth chapter the author analyzes how the national press grappled with finding out the Klan's degree of organization and its extent. While some issued warnings against the violent agenda of the group that required government intervention, others labeled such reports as exaggerations and portrayed the Klan as a victim of excessive government action and intervention. The fifth chapter expands that perspective and focuses on the skepticism and denial of KKK activities that, finally, opened up spaces for a selective memory in the 1870s that trivialized the importance of the Klan. Thus, Southern Democrats and some Northern Republicans found common ground for a post-Civil-War society that, in the end, enabled violence and discrimination against African Americans and their exclusion from a post-war political order.

The final two chapters (six and seven) slightly shift gears and employ a different interpretive perspective. While the other parts of the book generally follow a cultural-history framework with a focus on the national discourse about the KKK, the last part of the book only focuses on the personnel and the actions of the Klan in Union County, South Carolina. Employing network analysis Parsons is able to deepen the points made in the previous chapters, but also to highlight the element of collective violence. However, given their remarkably different methodological framework and approach these two chapters feel slightly disconnected from the rest of the book. So does the very short conclusion. A book that brings together so many diverse perspectives and theoretical approaches could have used a more stringent conclusion.

By focusing on the various modes of (self-)representation and the practices of producing knowledge about the Klan's activities Parsons has written a fascinating book that connects many dots on a cultural level. Her narrative of the KKK brings together popular culture, politics, violence,

gender etc. and, through that, emphasizes the multilayered processes of interpreting the KKK. She is, therefore, also able to address the old question of whether the Klan was a national organization or just an exaggeration of Anti-Southerners, who took a variety of local acts of violence as signs of an overall attempt to overthrow the post-Civil-War order – Parsons is saying that it was both and, thus, reminds us of the many different levels of interpretation. She is also able to capture both notions of ambiguity, uncertainty and doubt as well as the moments when symbolic and physical violence affected the lives of Northerners and Southerners as well as those of Freedpeople.

All in all, this is a very smart, readable and, at times, very entertaining monograph that productively combines different angles and methodologies from the general area of cultural history. Given this particular focus one is, however, inclined to ask about the effects actual Klan violence had on Black communities or the Reconstruction order. For instance, how were families affected by nightly attacks on a socio-economic level? Luckily, Parsons leaves room for additional interpretations of the Reconstruction Klan coming from other domains, such as social history.