Reading the Blackened Faces of the Ku-Klux Klan in the Reconstruction-Era United States

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There is a reason why it surprises us to hear that blackened faces were probably as common as forms of Klan disguise as were elaborate robes and headgear. One of the greatest successes of Ku-Klux Klan apologists was convincing many of their contemporaries, and us, that Klan violence was unique, bizarre, and novel. This supposed otherness was signified by its costume. As the canonical history of the Klan's founding in the second half of the 1860s coauthored by an original member explained, "it only required a quaint garb and some mysterious sounds to convince the uninitiated that we were spirits from another world."[1] Ku-Klux members claimed that their outlandish costume and performance was for the benefit of "superstitious freedmen." While there is scant evidence that freedpeople were frightened by the spectacular costumes rather than the deadly weapons stowed beneath them, Northerners then and historians ever since have been transfixed by the spectacle of the costume. Scholars have approached the Klan as if it were an anomaly: meaningfully distinct from the relentless white-on-black violence that preceded, surrounded and coexisted with, and followed it. We have focused unduly on a minority of Ku-Klux attackers who imported ritual and costume elements from European and Caribbean carnival traditions, masquerade balls, and fraternal orders. These attackers played weird music, developed a mysterious code language to announce their meetings in newspapers, and paraded about in a wide variety of costumes, including the expensively produced white robes with tall conical hats and masks affixed which would later become iconic. This garish performativity transmuted terrible but prosaic racist criminality into racist terrorism: it intrigued the press, which spread news of the attacks, circulating the terror beyond Klan attacks' direct victims. It also marked the wealth and resources of Klan attackers, implied extensive planning and coordination, and, essentially,

1 Lester and Wilson 1905, 22.

defined Klan violence as discontinuous with and distinct from the pervasive racial violence which surrounded it.[2]

To the extent that it drew upon the carnivalesque, Ku-Klux performed inversion: gendered and racial drag. While Ku-Klux were all or almost all men, they often used feminine costume elements and witnesses sometimes noted that they looked like women. The same is true with race: while Ku-Klux were all or almost all white, there are many examples of their costuming themselves as Black. I have elsewhere considered the significance of inversion as an interpretive key to Klan costumes: in representing themselves as women, Ku-Klux at once claimed, parodied, and rejected feminine qualities (Frantz [Parsons] 2005). Similarly, in evoking Blackness, Ku-Klux inhabited certain perceived strengths of Blackness, while also mocking and distancing themselves from Blackness.

As powerful as the carnivalesque is as an interpretation of Klan costumes, however, when we focus too exclusively on it, we miss most of what the Ku-Klux were signaling and doing. To begin with, we have been so transfixed by these costumes that we have seen them even when they weren't there. Only a minority of Klan attackers wore sensational costumes like the ones we imagine. A large proportion of Klan attackers wore only cheaply and easily-made costume elements or no costume at all. Such attacks were and are more easily recognizable as continuous with familiar forms of violence. Even minimal costumes could convey substantial meaning, of course. One of the most common forms of less-than-spectacular Klan costuming was blackening the face. Blackened faces were likely as common a disguise among Klan attackers as were the elaborately carnivalesque costumes which historians have associated with them. Despite the contemporary fascination with the more sensational costumes, contemporaries also knew—as later generations forgot—that many Ku-Klux simply blackened their faces. The contemporary association between violence with blackened faces and the Ku-Klux was so strong during the active period of the Klan that when four men in Pittsburgh blackened their faces in 1871 to rob a bank—a crime with no apparent political or racial motivation—a Washington, DC, newspaper entitled its article about the robbery "The Ku-Klux Klan."[3]

Ku-Klux in blackened faces foreground elements of this terrorist movement that are usually neglected and recontextualize interpretations of the Klan which focus too exclusively on carnivalesque inversion. Blackened-faced Ku-Klux—although they themselves were often or always engaged in racial drag like their more sensationally dressed peers—reveal the Klan's continuity

2 I have written about the significance of Klan costuming, focusing (though not exclusively) on more elaborate costumes, at greater length in "Midnight Rangers" (Frantz [Parsons] 2005).

3 *The Daily Patriot* 1871, 1.

with other violent traditions in the United States and beyond, and turn our attention to the many Klan attacks which were more spontaneous, less elaborately prepared, and required no special resources. These blackened-faced attacks had performative significance overlapping with but distinct from that of carnivalesque costumes. Focusing on Klan attackers with blackened faces underlines Klan attacks' continuity with what Kidada Williams calls "the ordinary violence of emancipation" (Williams 2012, 19). It opens up the meanings of blackened faces in the Reconstruction-era United States (1863—1877).

The Ku-Klux Klan, which emerged in Pulaski, Tennessee, sometime between the spring of 1866 and the spring of 1867, was among many anti-Black, anti-Republican terrorist groups which spread through much of the US South in the decade after the end of the Civil War. These loosely connected groups committed terroristic violence through much of the former Confederacy and parts of Missouri and Kentucky: beating, whipping, raping, driving from their homes, and otherwise abusing thousands, and killing hundreds of Black (and white) Republicans. Beginning in 1868, many of these groups adopted the name of the Pulaski-based group, calling themselves "Ku-Klux." Klan victims were only a small part of the hundreds of thousands of freedpeople and their allies terrified, injured or killed by white people acting independently or collectively in the massive struggle following emancipation.[4] Both Southern white supremacists and federal leaders, however, promoted the idea that most white-on-Black violence was Klan violence: white Southern elites hoped that the federal government might be forced to give concessions in the face of distinct and organized mass resistance to its efforts to rule the formerly insurrectionary states, and the idea of such resistance legitimized federal control in the South, and made it possible to promise that the continued oppression of Black Southerners was the kind of problem a military could solve.

Because of such pressures to present Klan violence as exceptional, attacks which were more elaborately performative received more attention than those perpetrated by uncostumed attackers or those in simple costumes such as blackened faces. The term "blackface" would not be in common use until the 1890s: instead, people referred to "blackened," "blacked," or "smutted" faces. The primary referent of "blackened face" was minstrel performance. Minstrel shows—which mainly featured white men mimicking Black men and women with faces blackened and often with wigs and grotesquely painted lips, had blanketed the mid-nineteenth-century North and South since the late

4 The best overview of Klan violence remains Trelease 2023 (1971). An excellent review of private, non-Klan white-on-Black violence in this period is Vandal 2000. Chapter Seven of Roth (2009) places mid-nineteenth century vigilante homicide in the broader context of other forms of inter- and intraracial homicide.

antebellum period. When Reconstruction-era Americans saw a person with a blackened face, minstrelsy would likely have been their first thought. Minstrel blackening was not meant to realistically evoke the appearance of Black human faces, of course. "Created from burnt cork mixed with grease, it was black without shading, and usually darkened to an artificial extreme" (Johnson 2012, 8). Blackened faces transformed an actor into a racist caricature and transformed a personal face into a generic signifier. Even those black actors who performed as minstrels sometimes "blacked up": Frederick Douglass noted that in adopting the racist exaggerations of white minstrelsy, they failed to represent the Black man "as he is" (Gilmore 1997, 773). Eric Lott and others have powerfully explored the complex work of minstrelsy, as actors simultaneously impersonated and dehumanized Black people (Lott 2013).

The blackened faces of Klan terrorists were usually significantly different than those of theatrical professionals. Witnesses rarely knew how Klan attackers had blackened their faces, but it is most likely that they smutted their faces with substances like dirt and soot. Yet, their faces evoked the more intensive blackening of the stage, including its claim to deindividualization. As Evelyn Annuß has put it speaking more broadly of costumed Klan violence, the terrorists themselves became "gesichtslos," or faceless.[5]

A blackened face did not only imply racial drag, however: contemporaries also associated it with other things. The first was death: newspapers described certain corpses, particularly those of people killed in sudden and violent ways, as having "blackened faces." This included those killed by poison or fire, passengers killed in steamboat explosions, soldiers killed by military explosions, and people who had been hanged.[6] In the wake of the Civil War, the association of blackened faces with quick and unnatural death would have had particular power.

The blackened face also had a strong association with nocturnal crime. American newspapers, including those in the Reconstruction-era South, regularly covered contemporary robberies or assaults by men in blackened faces.[7] Some racialized meaning attached to criminals' blackened faces: Simon Balto has recently explored the contemporary phenomenon of white people assuming racial drag in order to pin their crimes on Black people (Balto 2024). We cannot know how frequently that successfully occurred. But in many other cases, contemporaries described blackened-faced nocturnal crime without suggesting that the criminal might in fact be Black, portraying it as a pragmatic

5 See Annuß 2025, 169.

6 See *Fall River Daily Evening News* 1867, 1; *Franklin Democrat* 1866, 2; *Louisville Daily Courier* 1867, 1.

7 See *Chicago Tribune* 1866, 2; *Daily Dispatch* 1866, 2; *New York Daily Herald* 1866, 4.

effort to make the face less visible by moonlight or simply to obscure identity. Blackened-faced criminals were a trope in fiction as well: where a disguised criminal appeared, readers knew that a familiar face would be exposed underneath at story's end.

Newspapers reported contemporary examples of blackened-faced attackers in the North, as when a group of Ohio residents in 1866 sooted their faces to attack local "vagrants and chicken thieves," or when a group of twenty men with sooted faces in 1871 assaulted a couple they deemed to be living immorally, tarred and feathered the woman and dragged her around the yard, naked "like a stuck pig."[8] They were keenly aware as well of the blackened faces of the Irish revolutionary group, the Fenians, who were directly contemporary to the Klan.[9] While surely these "vigilante" attacks were not devoid of racial meaning, cross-racial drag seems to be secondary. In these contexts, blackened faces primarily indicated transgression itself: the intent to violate laws in order to achieve a collective goal.

Blackened-faced vigilantism connected violent men through time as well as through space. As Eric Lott's contribution to this collection argues, blackface "always carries other times in it." And, indeed, blackened faces also suggested continuity with historical acts of collective violence. As E. P. Thompson most influentially established, blackened-faced crime was a tradition stretching at least as far back as the medieval period in England.[10] Reconstruction-era Southerners were well aware of this history: Southern newspapers included romantic fiction about rural robbers and highwaymen in the early national United States or in historical England.[11] These stories did not exactly celebrate the blackened-faced robbers—the heroes were the men who discovered the criminals' identities and confronted them—but they did romanticize them as representing a freer time when government was distant and men made their choices and faced their dangers on their own.

Some historic violence in blackened face was not solely for individual gain, but was a form of collective expression of grievance against authority or of moral norms. In the early American context (and even in the Reconstruction era) attackers with blackened faces were sometimes described as "Indian" rather than "Black." Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* decodes the multiple meanings and European precedents of dressing as Indians in the Revolutionary Era.

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8 Newspaper article introduced into evidence during the testimony of B. F. Sawyer, see *Report of the Joint Select Committee* (hereafter referred to by *KK Report*) 1872, vol. 7, Georgia II, 898.

9 See *Daily Ohio Statesman* 1866, 2; Snay 2007.

10 See *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* 1871, 1; Thompson 1975, 76.

11 See *Yorkville Enquirer* 1868, 1.

Reconstruction-Era Southerners were as aware of this centuries-long tradition of blackened-faced vigilantes as they were of robbers with blackened faces. Those in the Reconstruction era repeating the iconic revolutionary story about the Boston Tea Party, for instance, referred to participants' "blackened faces."[12] The fact that blackened faces could evoke both enslaved African Americans and indigenous Americans reveals a productive slippage. If there was one thing white Americans in the 1860s and 1870s thought they knew about indigenous Americans, it was that they were close enough to gone, and it was common among white people in the Reconstruction-era South and North alike to predict that without the alleged former guidance, protection, and support of slaveholders, the "doomed race" would simply die, like the indigenous allegedly had before them, of their own deficiencies.[13] This points to a potential continuity between blackened faces and what Raz Weiner, in his essay in this volume, describes as the necropolitics of racialized drag: in blackening their faces, Ku-Klux also enacted the replacement of now-unwelcome Black Southerners.

Not only were these alternative significances of blackened faces in widespread national circulation—they were present in specific places important to the development of Klan terrorism. Blackened faces were present as the Klan took root and may have been the first disguise used by the men who created the Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee. One of the Klan's initiators was an editor of the *Pulaski Citizen* and in early 1867, just as the Klan was emerging locally, that paper called for a strolling minstrel band to visit town to alleviate their boredom, and mentioned that if one could not be hired, local men could create their own. Soon afterward, the *Citizen* published an article giving instructions on how to remove tan from one's face.[14] And early Ku-Klux own recollections, supported by an 1866 carte de visite which appears to represent the first Klan members playing musical instruments, and which refers to them as "Midnight Rangers," reveal that the men who created the Klan in Pulaski also did nighttime serenades. The carte de visite does not depict them with blackened faces, but their instruments suggest that they were performing in a style to which blackened faces were traditional.[15]

The *Pulaski Citizen* was well aware of the connection between blackened faces and racial violence. In the summer of 1866, the *Citizen* ran a story about the recent robbery of four gentlemen by men "disguised by the blacking of their faces."[16] Between 1866 and 1871, the *Citizen* covered the Fenian uprising

12 Gilman 1874, 33; Etting 1876, 69; *Our Monthly* 1873, 291; Deloria 1998, 11.
13 *The Tennessean* 1867, 2. Or see *Public Ledger* 1868, 1.
14 See *Pulaski Citizen* 1867a, 3; *Pulaski Citizen* 1867b, 3.
15 Parsons 2005, 811.
16 *Pulaski Citizen* 1866, 2.

heavily and generally approvingly, though without mentioning blackened faces. In August 1868, the paper noted that Nathan Bedford Forrest, who is often thought to have been the head of the Klan but who claimed to disapprove of its excesses, had routed a group of men in blackened faces, calling themselves Ku-Klux, who were attacking Black men in Memphis.[17]

Newspapers circulating in areas with the most Klan violence also mentioned these other meanings of blackened faces. Most strikingly, in November of 1868, within one month of the first reports of Klan activity there, the newspaper in Yorkville, South Carolina, one of the biggest locations of Klan activity, gave over most of its front page to a short story about an early national robber with a blackened face.[18] Not only those who created and propagated the Klan, but presumably those who participated in and were victimized by Klan attacks, were well aware of the multiple meanings of sooted faces.

Ku-Klux also would have been aware that even before the Klan's rise, groups of men with blackened faces had been attacking freedpeople and their few white allies. In parts of Texas, the "Black Calvary" terrorized freedpeople with "blackened faces" by 1866.[19] That same year, men with blackened faces whipped a freedman teaching school in Jackson, Louisiana, and attacked a former Union soldier who was visiting relatives in Kentucky, whipping him with a cowhide.[20] In Panola, Mississippi, a white Northern Republican postmaster was driven from town by "ruffians with blackened faces" in January of 1867.[21]

When, in the spring of 1868, Klan attacks fanned through the South, it would not have seemed remarkable that many of them sooted their faces. Wearing black masks (by the Reconstruction era these were sometimes available in general stores, presumably intended for masquerades) was different than blacking the face and would have lacked some of the resonance of blackening, but black masks and blackening could also flow together in reports of attacks.[22] There are dozens of reports of Ku-Klux, and other costumed terrorist groups wearing simple black masks or black cloth hoods, across the South. C. D. Forsythe, in Paulding County, Georgia, recalled that the disguises were "a kind of black gown, and a black mask that went over the face, with places cut for the eyes, and some fantastic colors about it in places to make it look

17 See *Pulaski Citizen* 1868, 4.

18 See *Yorkville Enquirer* 1868, 1.

19 See *Bangor Whig and Courier* 1866, 2.

20 See *Public Ledger* 1866, 2; *Evansville Daily Journal* 1866, 8.

21 See *Memphis Daily Post* 1867, 8.

22 See testimony of Charles Smith in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 7, Georgia II, 598, where he testifies: "Some just had those faces on that you see in the stores."

frightful."[23] Victim Henry Lowther recalled that his attackers had something thin over their face, black oilcloth.[24] Elias Hill in South Carolina testified that one of his attackers had black oilcloth over his head, and something like gloves covering his hands and wrists: "I could see his face all around his eyes."[25] In 1871, a newspaper reported an attack by Kentucky Ku-Klux, wearing masks, and with faces darkened underneath them.[26]

There are dozens more instances of Ku-Klux and other terrorist bands wearing blackened faces, in Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, and North and South Carolina. A Republican political leader in New Orleans named Charles B. Young testified that in 1868 "There was another [Republican club in New Orleans], of which I was president … known as the head club of the first ward, which was entered by about six men with blackened faces; or masks, about 10 o'clock at night, armed with double-barrel shotguns."[27] One of the most notorious early Ku-Klux murders, that of Republican leader George Ashburn in Columbus, Georgia, in March 1868, was conducted by "a party of persons in masks, and with blackened faces."[28] A man named Charles Wilson, in 1872, was taken from his house in Missouri and whipped by a "band of men with blackened faces."[29] A Mississippi victim asked to describe his attackers responded: "the fact is, I was so excited I could not take particular notice of their disguise. Their faces were blacked; and some of them had cloth hanging around the sides of their faces; they had on red pants, I believe, with a large belt around the waist, with bowie-knives and pistols."[30] A white attack victim in Florida said his attackers "had smut on their faces."[31]

Sometimes Klan blackface explicitly evoked meanings other than racial ones. The blackened face itself (and Ku-Klux costumes generally) was theoretically opaque. It had such a multitude of symbolic referents that it rarely just meant racial drag. To blacken the face was to dress like a Black man, but it was as much to dress like a white man dressed as a Black man. It was to dress like a vigilante: Ku-Klux of course liked to think of themselves as vigilantes, sometimes articulating explicitly during an attack which communal norms they were defending, sometimes reading a list of charges aloud, or even leaving a written

23 Testimony of CD Forsythe in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 6, Georgia I, 84.
24 See testimony of Henry Lowther in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 6, Georgia I, 360.
25 Testimony of Elias Hill in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 5, South Carolina III, 1408.
26 See *Chicago Tribune* 1871, 2.
27 "Testimony Taken in the Sub Committee of Elections" 1870, 484.
28 Meade 1868, 6.
29 Lawrence 1872, 693.
30 Testimony of Cornelius McBride in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 11, Mississippi I, 327.
31 Testimony of R. W. Cone in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 13, Florida I, 69.

account of the reason for their visit.[32] Connecting themselves to vigilantes tied Ku-Klux to time-tested, and transatlantic traditions in a way that perhaps they believed lent legitimacy to their violence. It was to dress as a thief: in addition to their personal violence, Ku-Klux regularly stole things. They often stole things of value such as money, guns, clothing, presumably for pragmatic reasons. But the fact that they also stole small things, like a slate pencil, from the people they attacked, might suggest a deliberate performance of or nod to blackened-faced burglary.

To blacken one's face was also to dress as a dead man: Ku-Klux frequently called themselves ghosts. They referred to themselves as dead Confederates back from the grave, or claimed to be specific deceased people.[33] The first Ku-Klux group, in Pulaski, Tennessee, leaned heavily into a "ghostly" identity, and apparently claimed to be "spirit[s] from another world … killed at Chickamauga."[34] One group of racial terrorists in Missouri was alternately known as "Ku-Klux" and "Dead Men."[35] When a group of Ku-Klux, some of whom were wearing masks and others of whom "had just blacked up the biggest part of the face," confronted Mitchell Reed in Georgia, "They said they were Ku-Klux and came out of the ground."[36] Another Black victim in that state, Charles Smith, attacked by a group of men who were "just blacked and marked up," had been warned by his former master that the Ku-Klux might come for him. The white man told him that "they are men that rise from the dead."[37] Prominent Democrat James Holt Clanton, called to give an overview of the Klan in Alabama, was asked for instances of Klan violence. He recalled that one boy had decided to scare Black people by dressing up in a mask in a graveyard. Rep. Job Stevenson asked: "The idea was that kuklux came out of graveyards?"[38] and Clanton responded only that the boy was foolish.

When Ku-Klux and other anti-Black terrorists adopted these blackened faces, part of what they were doing was racial masquerade, usually performing as Black men, occasionally as "Indians." Sometimes they "tangled their hair"[39] along with blackening their faces. Sometimes they "black[ed] their faces and dress[ed] up like negro troops."[40] Sometimes they added a stereotyped

32 See Waldrep 2002.

33 See testimony of Mary Anne Norvill in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 2., North Carolina I, 473, and testimony of Simpson Bobo in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 4, South Carolina II, 802—803.

34 Lester and Wilson 1905, 73.

35 *The News* 1871, 2.

36 Testimony of Mitchel Reid in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 7, Georgia II, 647.

37 Testimony of Charles Smith in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 7, Georgia II, 598—599.

38 *The News* 1871, 2.

39 Testimony of Mary Brown in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 6, Georgia I, 376.

40 *Charles City Intelligencer* 1866, 1.

racialized performance, such as making war-whoops or performing elements of minstrel shows, by cracking jokes or performing music, or by forcing their victims to assume minstrelesque behaviors.[41]

At least some, and arguably all Ku-Klux who blackened their faces, then, were in racial drag. Some of these, but not others, intended or hoped to be mistaken for Black. The Democratic Party during the Klan period embraced a Big Lie: many claimed that most or all Ku-Klux violence was a "humbug" and a "bug-a-boo" or even denied that real Ku-Klux existed. This denialism spread from rural white Southerners to the halls of Congress. There was so much evidence of Klan violence, however, that some attacks had to be explained away rather than denied. Blackening their faces made it possible for Klan apologists to claim that certain terrorist acts had been committed by Black men disguised as Ku-Klux. This claim was pervasive in the Democratic press: even the *New York Herald* claimed that "Three-fourths or more of the crimes committed in [the South] have been wrongly attributed to the Ku-Klux. Many in fact have been committed by the negroes and their radical carpet bag allies who pretend to have such a horror of the Ku-Klux."[42]

It is hard to say whether white American Klan deniers truly believed that Klan violence was committed by Black people, or whether they made this claim for strategic reasons or because they found it entertaining to do so. This was a period of popular fascination with disguise: people tended to be credulous about the power of "ingenious disguises," and newspaper accounts casually suggested that blackened faces could cause white people to pass for Black, even in daylight.[43] Klan attacks generally happened at night, and witnesses often saw attackers at a distance, or while under great duress, so visibility would have been low. Some people did testify that costumes successfully obscured the race of attackers. When a man named Nelson Harris was taken from a jail in Union, Alabama, tortured, and killed, his (presumably white) jailers later said: "These persons [who abducted him] came in with their faces blacked, or were black men."[44] John A. Minnis, the district attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, claimed of a group of attackers in Limestone, Alabama: "They were in disguise, and nobody could identify them either as colored or anything else."[45] Like these two witnesses, claims to the racial ambiguity of attackers were often made not by the victims themselves, but by white people called upon to explain

41 For more discussion of minstrelesque performance during attacks, see Frantz [Parsons] 2015, 101—107.

42 *New York Daily Herald* 1871, 6.

43 *The Fairfield Herald* 1872, 1.

44 Testimony of William Miller in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 8, Alabama I, 3.

45 Testimony of John A. Minnis in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 8, Alabama I, 539.

the attacks, presumably sympathetic to the Klan's goals. These speakers had a transparent ideological motivation to keep open the possibility that these blackened-faced attackers were, in fact, Black.

Claims to the racial ambiguity of attackers made by victims are harder to explain away: but they are rare and almost entirely made by the minority of victims who were white. Drury Goings, a white radical who was brutally attacked by the Klan in Union, South Carolina, said that "they were so perfectly disguised that I could not tell if they were black or white men."[46] But Goings was confused not by blackening or even black masks but by (not black) disguises which covered the entire head: "it seemed a kind of paste-board in a square, and with holes in it at the top of them, and a kind of horse's ears."[47] Florida E. Cone, a white victim of an attack in Florida, noted that while she knew and immediately identified her attackers, the blackening of one of the men's faces was "very dark, almost as dark as a colored person any way. You could hardly tell if it was smut or the natural color; that is, a person who did not know him."[48]

John O. Perry, a white man in Georgia to whose home two Black men fled when the Klan was pursuing them, likely understood that the men approaching were white before he saw them because the men hiding in his home had alerted him that the Ku-Klux was on their heels, but his wording suggests how, on a dark night, illuminated only by the light of a match, blackening or a black mask or veil could confuse race: "I saw enough to know that they looked like negroes … Their faces either had something black on them or something black over their faces … . they were blacked or had something over them."[49]

The aftermath of one particularly horrific Klan attack shows the internal mechanics of how blackened faces could produce the illusion of racial ambiguity even when it failed to fool witnesses. Robin Westbrook, a Black man living in Jefferson, Alabama, was "a kind of a man that would not take any foolishness from a white man."[50] Ku-Klux surrounded his home: three entered and beat, shot and killed him as his wife, Betsy, and stepson, Tiller Reese, watched in horror. Betsy and Tiller later testified that despite the fact that one of these three was wearing a knit cap pulled over his face, and another had his face smutted, they were confident not only of the racial identities but of the specific identities of those who were inside the house and most central to the violence. They were all white neighbors, and Tiller and Betsy named them, explaining the specific

46 Testimony of Drury Goings in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 4, South Carolina II, 1074.
47 Testimony of Drury Goings in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 4, South Carolina II, 1072.
48 Testimony of Florida E. Cone in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 13, Florida I, 74.
49 Testimony of John O. Perry in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 6, Georgia I, 538.
50 Testimony of Tiller Reese in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1249.

grievances each had with Robin.[51] As a Black neighbor explained, "[Betsy] said she could not see their faces, but she was right there with them, and knew them all her life pretty well, and knew the shape, and how the men were made."[52] Nevertheless white witnesses repeatedly claimed that Betsy Westbrook had been unsure of the racial identity of the attackers, or had claimed the attackers were Black. Dr. Seth D. Smith informed the committee that a "Squire Smith" had told him that Betsy Westbrook had sworn that the perpetrators were Black men.[53] When the Sheriff of the county, Jacob Michael, Jr., was first asked about the Westbrook murder, he quickly remarked, "they didn't know whether [the attackers] were black or white."[54]

This story illustrates the most significant function of blackened faces within Klan attacks, and suggests that the disguises were for the larger public—newspaper readers and political leaders—as much or more than for the eyes of victims or witnesses. Klan attackers in racial drag were sometimes attempting to pass themselves off as Black men. But blackened faces, to be effective, did not require verisimilitude: Black witnesses, and even white Republicans, had so little credibility in the eyes of whites in power, and so little control over local discourse, that even the most transparent disguise was sufficient to discredit their testimony, retroactively projecting onto them a confusion about the race their attackers that they had not experienced.

When Ku-Klux bands donned racial drag, they knew that their allies in the Democratic press would take advantage of this ambiguity. If part of the work of blackface Klan attacks was activating a necropolitics of replacement, it is ironic that Ku-Klux often used blackface to suggest that they, themselves didn't exist. Kentucky Klan attackers wearing blackface under their masks were attempting, the newspaper covering the attack speculated, "to create the report that they were negroes, as it has been the fashion of the Democratic press of Kentucky to accuse negroes of engaging in such work."[55] This dynamic shaped a powerful pro-Klan national counterdiscourse which provided plausible deniability to Republican narratives of Klan outrages.[56] Southern papers also stirred the waters by referring to any groups of Black men committing or threatening acts of violence, legally sanctioned or not, as "Negro Ku-Klux."[57] Pro-Klan newspa-

51 See testimony of Betsy Westbrook in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1243—1244, and testimony of Tiller Reese in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1248.

52 Testimony of George Jones in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1392.

53 Testimony of Seth Smith in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1253.

54 Testimony of Jacob Micheal, Jr. in *KK Report* 1872, vol. 9, Alabama II, 1373.

55 *Chicago Tribune* 1871, 2.

56 See *The Daily Journal* 1868, 3.

57 *Nashville Union and American* 1871.

pers like the *Yorkville Enquirer* and the *Union Times* frequently claimed that Black men staged Ku-Klux outrages by attacking one another in order to justify federal military intervention.[58]

The stacked multiple meanings of blackened faces made them a powerful symbol: a Ku-Klux in blackened face was engaging in racial drag. But also: evoking of grotesque death, criminality, communal vigilantism, and traditions of lawlessness that spanned time and place. Not far beneath it all lurked a necropolitics of replacement. The Ku-Klux's blackened face was a particularly multivalenced form of racial drag, far from simply carnivalesque. This multiplicity of meaning was a crucial aspect of the effectiveness of this particular iteration of white terror.

Contemporary media and historians alike often struggle to hold open the analytical complexity of violent attacks. Our primary obligation, when confronted with violence, is to prevent it (at the moment) or condemn it (in retrospect). For that, we want clarity. So we strip the scene of violence of its detail and complexity as we focus on that crucial task. Despite their seeming "mysterious" nature, elaborately costumed Klan, which "came from nowhere," emerging in 1867, and disappeared, a few years later, as quickly as they had appeared, are a problem in a box, and one that one can imagine solving. Their blackened-faced fellow terrorists are harder to pin down, more obviously continuous with and intricately connected to a broader culture of violence. This less-spectacular Klan neither arrived nor left, so has remained in the shadow of more spectacular forms of violence.

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58 See *Yorkville Enquirer* 1872, 2.

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