

The Bright Fiery Cross: The Role of Hostile Rituals for the Second Ku Klux Klan

Cole Cloyd

Edited by Ellie Ashby

Abstract:

To this day, the Ku Klux Klan remains one of the most recognizable and infamous organizations in American history. That enduring image can be credited to the mobilization of ritual by the Klan's second incarnation, with cross burnings being the central element of all Klan activity. Utilizing theoretical conceptions of ritual activity, I illustrate the dimensions of Klan ritual within their communities, such as their valorization of the past and the encouragement of "klannish" behavior. However, I argue that traditional theories have neglected the impact rituals have on outsiders, since Klan rituals were also designed to intimidate and threaten groups they despised. Ultimately, I demonstrate that rituals like cross burnings operate as "hostile rituals, where they elevate and reinforce the insider community while simultaneously attacking outsider groups. In my conclusion, I urge scholars of religion to understand the hostile dimensions of rituals and their presence across American history.

I. Introduction

On Thanksgiving Day in 1915, former Methodist minister William Joseph Simmons ascended Georgia's Stone Mountain alongside sixteen other men. They would light a cross on fire and swear themselves in as "pilgrims" who would defend the U.S. Constitution, "American ideals and institutions," and the "tenets of the Christian religion." The men then built a small altar composed of granite boulders with the American flag draped across them. Simmons would later write that this was the "foundation" of an institution dedicated to "the preservation of the white, Protestant race in America, and then, in the Providence of Almighty God, to form the foundation of the Invisible Empire of the white men of the Protestant faith the world over."¹ This event—this ritual steeped in racialized and religious language—would ignite a new era of the Ku Klux Klan.

With their long white robes, conical hoods, bizarre titles, and burning crosses, Klansmen are an instantly recognizable American institution. This did not happen overnight, with the Klan's cultural legacy mostly due to the efforts of its second incarnation. From 1915 to 1944, with millions of members coming from every state and a centralized body of leadership, this was the Klan's peak in terms of popularity and power.²

¹ William Joseph Simmons, *Official Message of the Emperor of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, to the Initial Session of the Imperial Klonvokation*, 7-8, quoted in Kelly Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas), 37.

² Baker, *Gospel*, 9-10.

What makes this version of the Klan so influential both historically and currently was the utilization of ritual. Even in their own day, the Klan was prolific for their pageants, marches, parades, and rituals that impacted Americans across religious, social, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This was a mainstream movement, and understanding the monumental impact of the Klan both past and present necessitates dissecting what Klan rituals did to various audiences.

Of particular importance is the origins and impacts of cross burnings, since this remains the Klan's most important and recognizable ritual. By feeding off previously mythologized depictions of the original Klan, the second Klan developed its own intricate ritual activities for a new era. Additionally, it is imperative to recognize that rituals like cross burnings uplifted Klan members and White, native-born Protestants as a whole, all the while intimidating Black, Catholic, Jewish, and immigrant populations. Ultimately, we see that while the second Klan would fracture and die, its methods of terrorizing their perceived opponents through ritual continue to this day.

II. The Klan's First "Rough Bunch of Boys"

Before analyzing Klan ritual in general, we must understand the original incarnation of the Klan. Established in 1866 by six Confederate veterans from Pulaski, Tennessee, this Klan started as a relatively ragtag group of pranksters. Taking the Greek

word for circle, *kuklos*, and adding the alliterative “klan” (which was adopted due to the group’s Scottish heritage), the deliberately mysterious-sounding Ku Klux Klan was born. The men would meet at night in secret, before riding their horses across town in disguise. Soon, people imagined the Klan to be the ghosts of dead Confederates who haunted Black folks, Reconstructionists, and carpetbaggers.³ The group embraced this vision as Southern liberals and their newfound notoriety led to expansion. With decentralized chapters across the South, the Klan became widely known for their acts of political violence.⁴

Simmons was certainly inspired by the original Klan in organizing his new fraternity, as seen in his usage of the original Klan’s terminology and titles.⁵ However, Simmons’ admiration for the Reconstruction era Klan was not unique. Rather, it reflected a prevalent belief in the Lost Cause mythos across the South, which presented the Confederacy as a blessed and ordained nation. While the Confederacy might have lost the war, God still endorsed its values as a Christian nation and manifestation of the Revolution’s Patriots. To protect that chosen identity, the “purity” of the South must be defended through racial violence and segregation.⁶

³ David J. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke, 2013), 9-10.

⁴ Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005), 76.

⁵ William J. Simmons, *Kloran*, 5th ed, (Atlanta: Ku Klux Klan, 1916), 4, http://archive.org/details/KloranOfTheKKK_201404

⁶ Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality*

The Lost Cause's mythmaking also extended into depictions of the Ku Klux Klan. Though they undeniably impacted Southern politics, the Reconstruction Klan was more of a decentralized White supremacist vigilante group than a fraternity of crusading heroes, often plagued by internal dissent and a lack of centralized authority until its dissolution in 1869.⁷ However, later Lost Cause narratives transformed the Klan into a knighthood worthy of admiration and imitation. Before long, organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy frequently extolled the Reconstruction Klan as heroes and protectors of White, Southern, godly values.⁸ It is in this environment that two pieces of Lost Cause media proved pivotal to Simmons' vision of a new Ku Klux Klan: Thomas Dixon Jr's *The Clansman* and D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.

III. **Remaking the Invisible Empire: The Impact of Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith**

In the 1905 novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, we see a visceral depiction of the Klan's two most famous activities: a cross burning and a lynching. In a chapter titled "The Fiery Cross," the Klansmen gag and blindfold a Black man in preparation for the lynching while *In America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2021), 23-24.

⁷ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 19-20.

⁸ "The Connection Between the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the KKK," Stories, Atlanta History Center, December 9, 2022, <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/blog/the-connection-between-the-united-daughters-of-the-confederacy-and-the-kkk/>.

various Klan leaders assemble for their various roles. The Chaplain opens by leading the group in a prayer uplifting the martyrs of the Confederacy, before asking God for deliverance from “the body of the Black Death.”⁹ Subsequently, the Grand Scribe reads from a “Book of Record, ‘*The Prescript of the Order of the Invisible Empire*,’” which speaks of the Klan’s values of “Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, and Patriotism.”¹⁰ The chapter concludes with a monologue by the Grand Dragon of the Land, the leader of the Klan in the state, who is dressed in white robes fashioned with crosses and a yellow sash. In his hand is a small cross with three points lit on fire; to his side is a silver goblet filled with a blood-like fluid. The Grand Dragon then speaks on the historic importance of this rite:

In olden times when the Chieftain of our people summoned the clan on an errand of life and death, the Fiery Cross, extinguished in sacrificial blood, was sent by swift courier from village to village. This call was never made in vain, nor will it be to-night in the new world. Here, on this spot made holy ground by the blood of those we hold dearer than life, I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men...The Fiery Cross of old Scotland’s hills! I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of Time.¹¹

⁹ Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (New York: Doubleday, 1905), 319.

¹⁰ Dixon, *Clansman*, 320.

¹¹ Dixon, *Clansman*, 325-326.

The Grand Dragon extinguishes the cross's flames with the crimson liquid, before handing the cross to a messenger. The messenger disappears into the night, heading off to inform Klansmen across the state that they will soon be marching to war.

The second Klan's symbolism is largely derived from Dixon's work and personal experiences. Inspired by his time in a college fraternity driven underground, he made the Klan's historical vigilantism more disciplined and hierarchical. Where the Reconstruction Klan rebelled against the social order, Dixon's (and later Simmons') Klan was about enforcing order.¹² Dixon created the uniform white robes and pointed hoods to sanitize and exoticize the Klan, making it militant and fraternal while also distinguishing Klansmen from the Civil War soldiers of the past.¹³

In addition to the uniforms, Dixon is also responsible for popularizing the Klan's association with the burning cross. Drawing from his Scottish heritage (like the Reconstruction Klan's founders), Dixon utilized the image to argue that White Anglo-Saxons were being called to war against "semi-barbaric black men" and assert their racial supremacy by force.¹⁴ Dixon's ahistorical use of the burning cross by the Klan, at its core, serves to connect a mythologized past and an idealized future of racial domination.

¹² Katherine Lennard, "Old Purpose, 'New Body': The Birth of a Nation and the Revival of the Ku Klux Klan." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 4 (October 2015): 618.

¹³ Lennard, "Old Purpose, 'New Body'", 617.

¹⁴ Blum, *Reforging*, 326-327.

Dixon's novel was immensely popular, and he followed up the success with a similarly successful and inflammatory theatrical adaptation.¹⁵ While neither version was particularly grounded in historical fact, the exoticized and heroic depiction of post-Civil War vigilantes remained in peoples' minds. Where the Klan of Reconstruction was a motley crew of vigilantes and Confederate veterans, Dixon helped present these men as a regimented force for the advancement of White Southern purity. That heroic image of the Klan would be best represented in one of the most infamous movies ever produced.

D.W. Griffith, a friend of Dixon's, was selected to direct a film adaptation of *The Clansman*. Griffith, who grew up in the post-Civil War South as the son of a Confederate colonel, did not alter Dixon's fundamental themes of Black people as abhorrent creatures who threatened White society.¹⁶ To further that point, Griffith added material presenting the Antebellum South and the slave trade. In a scene featuring enslaved Black people being sold at an auction, a title card appears and reads, "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." This, alongside depictions of Black men assaulting White women, was designed to win sympathy for the South and advance anti-Black racism across the nation.¹⁷

The film was immensely ambitious for its

¹⁵ John C. Inscoe, "'The Clansman' on Stage and Screen: North Carolina Reacts." *North Carolina Historical Review* 64, no. 2 (April 1987): 143-144.

¹⁶ Inscoe, "The Clansman", 147-148.

¹⁷ Inscoe, "The Clansman", 149.

day, with a budget greater than \$110,000 and a run-time of over three hours.¹⁸ Like the namesake novel and play before it, the film was immensely popular with audiences, who applauded its technical sophistication and dramatic flair. More importantly was how it stirred White audiences' utter contempt towards Black Americans.¹⁹ So awe-inspired by the film's production, Dixon implored his friend to rename the adaptation to better capture its power: *Birth of a Nation*.²⁰ *Birth of a Nation* was equally reviled by Black audiences, drawing condemnation by a nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, their protests did little to stop theaters from screening the film. Arguably, White audiences only became more curious and defensive over the film thanks to these protests, which symbolized Black antagonism towards White culture.²¹

Birth of a Nation was pivotal to popularizing Dixon's romanticized vision of the Ku Klux Klan, something that William J. Simmons used in introducing his new Ku Klux Klan. Capitalizing on *Birth of a Nation*'s pageantry and popularity in particular, Simmons frequently advertised his organization as "The World's Greatest Secret, Social, Patriotic, Fraternal, Beneficiary Order" reserved for "men of in-

¹⁸ Baker, *Gospel*, 4.

¹⁹ Inscoe, "The Clansman", 149.

²⁰ Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 48.

²¹ Inscoe, "The Clansman", 151.

telligence and character.”²² The Lost Cause mythos, *The Clansman*, and *Birth of a Nation* were pivotal to Simmons, who used their symbolism and rhetoric for his new incarnation of the Klan. Beginning with that cross burning on Stone Mountain, Simmons and the second Klan made the rites, rituals, and behaviors of fiction become reality.

IV. Not For Self, But For Others: Cross Burnings and Klan Ritual Activities

From the moment Simmons and his cohorts established the second incarnation of the Klan at Stone Mountain, rituals were core to their identity. Influenced by both the Reconstruction Klan and their later portrayals, as well as his time as a Methodist minister, Simmons sought to consolidate the rules and rites of the Klan to make a centralized fraternal order. To do this, Simmons created the *Kloran* (a play-on-words of “Quran” and “Klan”), a handbook detailing several of the Klan’s ceremonies and procedures, which was distributed to Klan members across the country.²³ The *Kloran* included rituals across its order of business, with its opening ceremony incorporating various objects like an altar, the American flag, a sword, and a “Fiery Cross.” Each object is handled by Klansmen of various roles, including the Night-Hawk, the Exalted Cyclops, and the Klaliff.²⁴ Even the ritual space, known as the Klavern, is neat-

²² Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 30.

²³ Baker, *Gospel*, 117.

²⁴ Simmons, *Kloran*, 8-10.

ly diagramed within the *Kloran*.²⁵ The *Kloran* is an eclectic document, containing Christian prayers, initiation rites, references to the Reconstruction Klan, and even explanations of all the Klan's convoluted (or konvoluted) terminology.

While there is certainly value in breaking down the individual rituals, all Klan activities are defined by one specific image: the "Fiery Cross." This burning cross, both as a symbol and a ritual, is core to all of the Klan's ritual activity.

Part of that significance lies in its mythology. A cross burning was the activity that Simmons used to give birth to the new Klan, which certainly gave it the status as a pivotal ritual, and Klan leadership made sure to illustrate the "history" behind the symbol. With Simmons and successors imagining the Klan as a Protestant fraternity, the fiery cross served to connect Klansmen to "the suffering and blood of the crucified Christ, bathed in the blood of fifty million martyrs who died in the most holy faith."²⁶ The Klan's newspaper, *The Imperial Nighthawk*, said that the cross served as "a constant reminder that Christ is our criterion of character."²⁷ In connecting to the Crucifixion and Christian martyrdom, Klansmen were given moral structure and communal identity. "Klan-craft," or the various responsibilities expected from all those associated with the Klan, was exemplified in the Klan's image of Jesus as a model of charity, humility, patience, and self-sacrifice.²⁸ Klan materi-

²⁵ Simmons, *Kloran*, 7.

²⁶ Baker, *Gospel*, 75.

²⁷ Baker, *Gospel*, 75.

²⁸ Baker, *Gospel*, 50

als would continuously emphasize Jesus' death on the cross as the perfect model for self-sacrifice, with similar sacrifices integral to all relationships within the Klan community. This was not just being nice to your neighbors and going to church on Sunday: Klansmen must be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the "Klandom" every day.²⁹ While the second Klan was a fraternity with social and political goals, the cross and the narratives around it illustrated that the Klan's goals were intimately woven with Protestant identity as a whole.

Other symbolic aspects of the Klan's cross, most notably the fire that engulfed it, inspired an antagonistic communal rhetoric. The fire surrounding the cross was presented as a light that would triumph over the darkness of Black people, Jews, Leftists, Catholics, and immigrants.³⁰ The flames connected not just to Christianity, but to the Klan's nativistic nationalism as well. The *Kloran* describes the fiery cross as a "symbol of the purest and most loyal patriotism...they dispelled the dense darkness of that (Reconstruction) frightful night, and at the rising of the sun of a glorious day, they saw the shades of that awful night receding."³¹ With the fiery cross, Klansmen had a symbol that represented their fight against racial, religious, and national impurity.

Like the original Klan and Thomas Dixon, Klansmen used their heritage to illustrate their White supremacist arguments. The fiery cross' association with the Scottish clan's call to war only reinforced

²⁹ Baker, *Gospel*, 53

³⁰ Baker, *Gospel*, 75.

³¹ Simmons, *Kloran*, 50-51.

the theme of White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant unity against those whose very existence threatened America's purity.³² The fiery cross, emblazoned on every Klansman's robe,³³ served to rally "the forces of Christianity" against the "hordes of the anti-Christ."³⁴

Ultimately, the various historical and mythological narratives imbued within the fiery cross—Christ's crucifixion, Christian martyrdom, the Scottish clans' call to war, and the Reconstruction Klan—all coalesced to shape Klan identity and community. This tight-knit and structured framework was also fiercely hostile towards the "other." Simply put, the Klan saw itself as the next generation of saints and crusaders who would be willing to fight for a pure America.

Cross burnings are also significant because they are the cornerstone of all Klan rituals and activities. Klan meetings had to begin with a cross burning, with a structure reminiscent of both Dixon's depiction in *The Clansman* and Simmons' own actions at Stone Mountain. There were specific roles and responsibilities outlined for how to go about cross burnings. The "Night-Hawk," a title carried over from the original Klan, was the "custodian of the Fiery Cross, which he carries in all ceremonies and Klavalkades (Klan parades)."³⁵

But the flaming cross, as the defining sym-

³² Baker, *Gospel*, 76.

³³ Kelly Baker, "The Artifacts of White Supremacy," University of Chicago Religion & Culture Forum, June 14, 2017, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2017/06/14/813/>

³⁴ Baker, *Gospel*, 76.

³⁵ Simmons, *Kloran*, 54.

bol of the Klan, often served as the framework for the other Klan ritual activities. Initiation ceremonies (or “naturalization” in Klan parlance³⁶) frequently exhibited a fiery cross, such as when a chapter near Richmond, Indiana inducted nearly 100 candidates in October of 1922. In a photograph of this induction, at the forefront is a handful of Klansmen in their signature white robes surrounded by dozens of men in suits, while the background contains an American flag flanked by two burning crosses.³⁷ At nearly every Klan rally in each of the contiguous 48 states, crosses were burned. Essentially, it was not a Klan rally until a cross was burned.

Even when crosses were not physically burned, the cross on every Klansman’s white robe illuminated the centrality of the image. In their various parades, such as the Klan’s 1926 march in Washington D.C., showed how Klansmen were willing to bear their crosses publicly. Thousands of members of the Klan, including then Grand Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans, marched through the nation’s capital unmasked, all proudly flaunting a symbol that represented their vision of pure, White, Protestant America.³⁸

It is also worth noting that Klansmen often bought merchandise with the cross imagery. In one catalogue, songs such as “The Old Fiery Cross” and

³⁶ Simmons, *Kloran*, 21.

³⁷ “Ku Klux Klan cross burning near Richmond, Indiana” Ball State University, Accessed November 1, 2023, <https://dmr.bsue.edu/digital/collection/swift/id/678/>.

³⁸ Library of Congress, *Ku Klux Klan parade*, 9/13/26, photograph, September 13, 1926, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016842485/>.

“The Bright Fiery Cross” were sold alongside gold jewelry featuring a Klan crest on top of a radiant cross.³⁹ Every aspect of Klan life, including the economic, revolved around burning cross imagery.

Most importantly, the burning cross remained a powerful symbol even when detached from other Klan ritual activities. This is most often seen in how the Klan frequently burned crosses around their targets, illustrating a very real threat of violence.⁴⁰ In 1925, the police were summoned to a predominantly Black neighborhood in Philadelphia as a 12-foot-tall cross was burned at an intersection. When the police arrived, the perpetrators were nowhere to be seen.⁴¹ In another case in Haworth, New Jersey, the Klan burned a cross outside of Walter Rodin’s home in August of 1926. While not exactly sure of the reason, Rodin told the *New York Times* that it was most likely related to his business dealings. Interestingly enough, one of Rodin’s neighbors described the cross burning as “a beautiful sight that everyone should have seen.”⁴² A Klan newspaper in 1924 said its Middlesex County, New Jersey chapter “came into its own” when it burned a cross on a prominent hill, overlooking both the predominantly White student body of the New Jersey College for Women and

³⁹ <https://go-gale-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/ps/i.do?p=PLEX-&u=asuniv&id=GALE%7CBLHILR477683432&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-&aty=ip>

⁴⁰ <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2017/06/14/813/>
⁴¹ <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/apps/doc/BLHILR477683432/PLEX?u=asuniv&sid=bookmark-&x-id=61a9a3d6&pg=1>.

⁴² <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2017/06/14/813/>.

the majority Black residents of the Second Ward.⁴³ At Columbia University in 1924, a Black law student named Frederick Wells had a seven-foot-tall cross burned outside of his mostly White residence building. Overnight, a threatening letter signed by the Klan was slipped under his door.⁴⁴

Examples such as these illustrate how cross burnings highlighted the internal communal aspects of the Klan, as well as its disdain for the groups it looked down upon. It also represented very real threats of violence; to be a witness to a cross burning might have meant you were a proud Klansman amongst your fraternal brothers, but it could have also meant that you were targeted by the Klan for anything it found abhorrent. Throughout the reign of the second Klan, Black folks, Jews, Catholics, immigrants, leftists, and many other Americans feared finding a cross burning in their front yard, which told them that the Klan wanted them dead or gone.

V. Its Holy Light Looks Down Upon You: Reflecting on Ritual

In all these aspects, we see the significance of the burning cross as the central ritual and symbol of the second Ku Klux Klan. It is ultimately reminiscent of Victor Turner's model of the "dominant symbol." In a dominant symbol, several ideas and in-

⁴³ "Cross Burnings," Rutgers University Scarlet & Black Digital Archive, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://scarletandblack.rutgers.edu/archive/exhibits/show/klan/cross>.

⁴⁴ "The 1924 Cross Burning at Columbia," Columbia University, accessed December 9th, 2023. <https://columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/historical-markers/furnald-hall-cross-burning.html>

terpretations are connected within a single symbol.⁴⁵ The fiery cross binds together different conceptions of Klannish identity, as well as the Klan's hope to burn away its racial and political "impurities." The fiery cross held many meanings and was tied to various histories and mythologies. The various narratives enveloped within the fiery cross—Dixon's reformed image of the Reconstruction Klan, the Scottish clans who used it as a call to war, and as a perfect symbol of Christian zeal across history—made it so powerful to the individual Klansman, who could pull from any of these narratives to justify a White, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon nativism. In whatever narratives they pull from, these Klansmen are ultimately recreating myths and imagining new futures.

Simmons' usage of the fiery cross, both in how it marked the Klan's rebirth and its centrality as a ritual symbol in documents like the *Kloran*, illustrates Émile Durkheim's functionalist perspective on rituals. In other words, cross burnings represented the shared values of Klan society.⁴⁶ Simmons imagined his Klan as a real moral community, with the expectation that Klansmen lived up to an American, masculine, and Protestant ideal.⁴⁷ In the fiery cross, Klansmen could rally together in their shared mission to be Protestant crusaders dedicated to the cause of American purity. The symbolic and ritual elements

⁴⁵ Victor Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald I. Grimes (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996), 520.

⁴⁶ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola: Dover, 2008), 10.

⁴⁷ Baker, *Gospel*, 98-99.

of cross burnings ultimately illustrated the Klan's fraternal relationship that emphasized their hope that both Klansmen and the nation would be pure.

Much like the Klan's personal code of conduct, Klan rituals involving the fiery cross, as mentioned previously, were heavily regulated. As Roy Rappaport illustrates, rituals are often built around a complex series of rules,⁴⁸ and the Klan is no different. Simmons' *Kloran* specified the distinct roles and ritual responsibilities that Klansmen needed to uphold. As Rappaport argues, consistency and performativity are what make rituals so powerful.⁴⁹ With cross burnings being so heavily regimented by Klan leadership, no wonder they became such a recognizable and influential aspect of Klan identity. More so, the Klan's hierarchical nature and organizational consistency (including in their ritual practices) allowed them to blossom into an organization with millions of members from across the country.

But, as we have seen in some of our examples, these rituals extended beyond the Klan as well. This is notably highlighted in Gerd Baumann's critique of Durkheim's model, illustrating that outsiders are also implicated in ritual activity.⁵⁰ As Baumann notes, even while these outsiders might not be physically present, they can be involved with rituals as a

⁴⁸ Roy Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald I. Grimes (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996), 428.

⁴⁹ Rappaport, "Obvious," 430.

⁵⁰ Gerd Baumann, "Rituals Implicates 'Others': Rereading Durkheim in a Plural Society," in *Understanding Rituals*, ed. Daniel de Coppet

kind of comparison.⁵¹ However, Baumann's categories of "bystanders," "spectators," "invited guests," "witnesses," and "outside beneficiaries" fail to account for the ways that activities like cross burnings involved unwilling participants. While Baumann's categories recognize that societies are certainly not homogeneous, with outsiders behaving as passive and active participants and responding to the rituals either with appreciation or derision,⁵² it ignores the ways that rituals like cross burnings engage people without their consent.

The examples of cross burnings illustrate that these rituals could be directed towards people outside of the Klan, often with varying interpretations. For Rodin, the cross burning in his yard had dual significance. While his neighbors saw the fiery cross as a beautiful sight that everyone should behold, Rodin saw it as a clear sign of Klan intimidation. Depending on who you were and what you did, Klan rituals like cross burnings could inspire emotions, either positive or negative, whether you wanted them or not. With people like Rodin, or those in Philadelphia and Middlesex County, there was no choice; these people were forced into participating in this ritual activity by the Klan, with the threat of violence an ever-present reality.

As David Kertzer notes, rituals are a key tool in defining our relationships to others. When rituals utilize potent symbols and language, they become emotionally engaging.⁵³ The Klan's utilization of fi-

⁵¹ Baumann, "Rituals Implicate," 102.

⁵² Baumann, "Rituals Implicate," 110-111.

⁵³ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, & Power* (New Haven, Yale,

ery crosses, with the racial and religious components attached to the symbol, made the organization recognizable for both its adherents and their opponents. More than anything, these rituals established roles in a grand drama.⁵⁴ In the spectacle of cross burnings and the rhetoric surrounding them, it was clear to both the Klan and outsiders that they were placed in what was seen to be a struggle for America's racial and religious identity; the Klansmen were the defenders and heroes, while the groups they antagonized were meant to be defeated, conquered, or expelled. But this drama is not static, and its roles must be performed.

These contrasting roles presented by the Klan and their rituals are reminiscent of what Mark Juergensmeyer describes as "performance violence." To understand acts as performance violence means we understand that the act itself has symbolic importance. These symbolic attacks represent an effort by the perpetrator to ultimately change the state of things. Perhaps more importantly, the targets are also symbols of what needs to be changed. They might be conceived of as an existential threat or a pollution to be removed, but they must be exterminated in the end. Like many other rituals, there are various ways people interpret and engage with acts of performance violence.⁵⁵ Similarly, as Lee Ann Fujii notes in her theory of "violent display," these are acts designed to be seen by the willing and unwilling, all of which

1988), 179-180.

⁵⁴ Kertzer, *Ritual*, 11.

⁵⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland: California, 2017), 155-157.

assume new roles in the greater spectacle.⁵⁶

While both Juergensmeyer and Fujii are discussing active acts of violence (such as lynchings and terror attacks), my claim is that hostile rituals like the Klan's cross burnings fit these categories because they remain targeted acts of aggression. The harm they inflict is psychological, since a threat remains with the act. In other words, in a hostile ritual such as a cross burning, the perpetrators and the victims understand that it could be done again or that attacks could escalate into outright violence. For Klansmen and their victims, that threat of escalating violence lurked behind every cross burning; if you were to see a fiery cross nearby, you might have understood that the next thing you see was a Klan lynch mob. Cross burnings and other hostile rituals have the spiritual significance of "performance violence" and "violent displays," but can be actively used instead of—or prior to—direct acts of physical violence.

In all these dimensions, we recognize that cross burnings and other Klan rituals contain plenty of components that other scholars of rituals present. The fiery cross certainly served to unite Klan communities, as well as mobilizing them according to their shared values around race, religion, and nationality. However, the ways that Klan rituals and symbols engaged with outsiders in an explicitly hostile, threatening manner, completely against their will, represent an aspect of ritual that is often ignored. For scholars to better understand rituals, we must recognize the realities of hostile rituals. Hostile rituals can

⁵⁶ Lee Ann Fujii, *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2021), 10.

be performed against those without consent, often as a way of threatening opponents or escalating conflict with them. For the second Klan, cross burnings as symbols and rituals represented not just communal values or a repetition of the past, but the hope for a new future. A future, that is, for the pure, White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. And if you stood in the way of that future, you could be the impurities that the fiery cross burned away.

VI. Conclusion: In the Shadow of the Invisible Empire

Though the second incarnation of the Klan would ultimately collapse as a unified body, thanks to various controversies and a waning membership, its legacy lives on. As a community with millions of members from every state in the country, it deserves to be understood as an influential aspect of American politics and religion. Most importantly, that significance comes from their iconic symbols. That fiery cross, written into lore by Thomas Dixon and popularized on the silver screen by D.W. Griffith, was what Simmons used to beget the Klan. It is what he and other Klan leaders used to inspire Klansmen and terrify their opponents, and that dual nature is what made it such a defining symbol.

Even after the second Klan's death, the fiery cross lives on. Future iterations of the Klan burned crosses to signal their dissatisfaction with civil rights protestors in the 1960s. Even today, various Klan, Neo-Nazi, and White supremacist groups mobilize cross burnings to illustrate both their communal sol-

idity and their capacity for violence. Long after Dixon, Griffith, and Simmons, the fiery cross still inspires fear and terror like few rituals and symbols can.

But terror goes beyond the Klan's fiery cross. For various hate groups and extremist organizations, new symbols continue to inspire both admiration and terror. This can be seen in 2017, when a collection of extremists marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, tiki torches in hand, chanting "Jews will not replace us." It can also be seen at the Capitol Riot on January 6th, 2021, when gallows were erected and people clamored to stop a supposedly stolen election, even if it meant killing their elected officials. Flags, memes, performances, symbols, and rituals continue to inspire and terrify. While the Klan might have given us the strongest example of ritual activity that encourages admiration by its adherents and fear in its enemies, rituals and symbols like the fiery cross are not unique.

Scholars must continue to ask critical questions about how rituals and symbols are changing, as well as how they might be used in our current moments to inspire new acts of terror and inspiration. If the fiery cross and the second Klan are any indication, we must be cognizant of the myriad dimensions of ritual and their capacity for hostility. While it might not be men in white robes and conical hoods setting crosses on fire, symbols and rituals will continue to be powerful tools of inspiration and terror.

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