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Raising America Racist: How 1920's Klanswomen Used Education to Implement Systemic Racism

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RAISING AMERICA RACIST: HOW 1920'S KLANSWOMEN USED EDUCATION TO
IMPLEMENT SYSTEMIC RACISM

by

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ABSTRACT

Although not widely known by the modern public, during the height of the Ku Klux Klan's second rise to power in the 1920's, a women's auxiliary was formed – The WKKK, or Women of the Ku Klux Klan. The WKKK was a crucial component in the normalization of the Klan in this era, as they organized public events such as picnics, parades, and ceremonies to draw in the masses. It is imperative however, to move beyond the typical historiographical depiction of Klanswomen's impact as public event planning because it downplays and ignores their foundational role in creating modern racism. One of the most insidious and lasting means the WKK used to establish white supremacy was through indoctrination and education. By examining the educational impact of the WKKK, we can illuminate how Klanswomen helped to secure white supremacy and played a role in establishing American systemic racism.

The WKKK particularly enacted this agenda through educational methods such as an internal focus on indoctrination of members and external support of public schools. Individual women were both instructed in Klan ideology and Klan positions on issues of the era and were held responsible for teaching such ideological foundations to children and the wider society. Children's auxiliaries shaped and formed impressionable young minds to grow into white supremacists, if not Klanswomen themselves. The public school system grew to prominence in large part because of the support these supremacists lent it and the policies they impressed upon it, which were dependent on inherent valuations of racial inequality and powerful white modes of operation. Understanding how white women insidiously and powerfully used education to assist in creating systemic

racism matters in the present, because it is key to acknowledging and beginning to dismantle a code of racism that Americans still operate by today.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, many observers have lamented that the “underground” movements of white nationalism, white supremacy, and racially motivated hate have been given a renewed confidence and microphone on the American stage. But if we look carefully, how far underground were these movements really, and who has been keeping them sustained despite our supposedly post-racial society? The answer lies in large part with white women. Formed in 1920, under the auspices of the promised equality of the new decade, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) exemplify white women’s work for white supremacy. More than a wife support group of the KKK, this little-known organization was led by white women seeking true equality with men and true supremacy over people of color. This historic example of white women’s racism should inform not just our understanding of racism today, but how white supremacy, racism, feminism, and whiteness itself are interrelated.

In this post-Trump election era of the awakening of white women to the struggle that women of color have long endured, white women’s historic and modern work to uphold the power of whiteness, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the privilege and benefits of whiteness, gets obscured. With a deeper examination of the WKKK we can begin to push past the intentional obscurity and bring clarity to a history of white women that has long needed exposure to the harsh and bright lights of modern criticism. The WKKK particularly enacted the Klan ideology of white supremacy and nativism through educational methods, such as internal focus on indoctrination and external, or public, advocacy. This paper illuminates how the white women of the Klan

used this kind of indoctrinating education to help secure a legacy of white supremacy and assist in the establishment of systemic racism. I lean on many scholars and racial justice organizations in defining systemic racism as a concept beyond individual racist acts - instead it is seen when prejudices are combined with power to imbue the very fabric and structures of our society.¹ Systemic racism also works to maintain the white supremacy that is inherent in our society, keeping white people in power while people of color are marginalized. Klanswomen actively utilized their power to cement their prejudice in one of the most crucial institutions of America – the education system – and white women after them have continued to work to uphold this vast inequity.

Many historians, sociologists, and scholars of women’s movements have studied the work accomplished by women’s organizations in the early half of the 20th century, but in the field of the WKKK specifically, Kathleen Blee’s *Women of the Klan* sets the foundation. Blee discusses the rise of a growing progressive female sentiment in the 1920s and 1930s within conservative and racially motivated movements such as the rebirth of the Klan, approaching the topic from a sociologic perspective and conducting many personal interviews with Klan members. Several master’s theses have used Blee as a starting point to explore aspects of the WKKK under a closer microscope, such as Kelli R. Kerbaway’s “Knights in White Satin” and place-based studies like Sarah Doherty’s

¹ Among the many scholars who have written on systemic and structural racism, see in particular Kimberlé Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, and George Lipsitz, *The Race Track: How the Myth of Equal Opportunity Defeats Racial Justice*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2018). For an interactive and more in-depth treatment of the systems we see systemic racism in most clearly, view Race Forward’s video series, “What Is Systemic Racism?” Race Forward, April 16, 2015, <https://www.raceforward.org/videos/systemic-racism>. See also the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance initiative, in particular, “What Is White Privilege, Really?,” Teaching Tolerance, August 15, 2018, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really>.

dissertation on the WKKK in Chicago, but few have focused specifically on the internal and external education efforts of the WKKK.²

More recently, Linda Gordon has deconstructed the rationale behind the success of the Klan of the 1920s and 1930s, commonly referred to as the Second Klan, and its lasting impact on the modern world in her book, *The Second Coming of the KKK* (2017). I owe much of my own interest in both the Klan and the WKKK of the 1920s and, accordingly, the theoretical foundation of this paper, to Gordon. Gordon's work argues that the KKK in this era made white supremacy and institutionalized racism successful using rhetoric, marketing schemes, and a widely accepted public image. Thus, the KKK in 1920s paved the way for white nationalism to take form in our modern age.

My research supports this conclusion, particularly Gordon's excellent analysis of how this 1920s Klan helped to create the kind of white nationalism we have seen grow tremendously since 2016. I differ from Gordon however, in my analysis of the WKKK's unique role in the creation of modern white supremacy. While the WKKK certainly had a large role in the picnics, parades, and huge public ceremonies that marked the 1920s Klan, I argue that their most powerful impact was actually through education. The educational agenda of the WKKK set the stage for a continuing legacy of white supremacy which feeds the more visible and growing white nationalism today. To describe Klanswomen's impact as mostly public event planning is, to a degree, to downplay and ignore their foundational role in creating systemic racism. This essay intends to fill that gap in the historiography by detailing the educational successes of the WKKK.

² Kelli R. Kerbaway, "Knights in White Satin: Women of the Ku Klux Klan," (M.A. thesis, Marshall University, 2007); Sarah Elizabeth Doherty, "Aliens Found in Waiting: Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Suburban Chicago, 1870-1930," (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University of Chicago, 2012).

I first establish how the WKKK educated their own members and children in Klan ideology, what I define as internal indoctrination. Secondly, I detail how this internal indoctrination allowed Klanswomen to effectively undertake external education advocacy for public schools and a federal Department of Education. I employ a methodology that analyzes the public documents of the WKKK such as published speeches, guidelines, and other rhetoric, as well as numerous Klan newspapers of the era. While the lack of availability of the WKKK's internal communications might pose a research dilemma, the public sources give us a view into what was most important and noteworthy to the women, especially in education.³ I make frequent references to the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) as a means of comparing and contextualizing the Klanswomen, as well as to assert that the WKKK was not one outlier organization of white women but was representative of a broader theme of white women creating the system of white supremacy. I further contextualize the WKKK through the activities of the men's KKK during this second Klan era, particularly in the prolific production of print materials like Klan newspapers. The post-Nineteenth Amendment environment of 1920s-1930s America, where Klan activity was broadly accepted and encouraged, gave rise to and informed the WKKK's mission, goals, and accomplishments.

However, it is also important to note that this paper is not about the male Klan or a comparison of the WKKK to the male Klan. So, while there are plentiful primary and secondary resources on the KKK during the 1920s era, they are not treated here in order to shine an unflinching light on the activities of white women. To address white women's

³ It is important to define what is meant by the term "education" as it is used throughout this paper. The WKKK used the term "education" to refer to their methods of teaching white supremacy, but it should not be construed that as a historian I tacitly support the Klan's appropriation of the term education. Rather, I use this label in accordance with how the WKKK characterized their propagandist activity.

racism fully and completely, we need to see it as distinct from white male racism – as willfully and purposefully chosen to advance a white woman’s own agenda, not only in service of men’s agenda. For too long, women have only been imagined as sideline cheerleaders and complicit housewives to the white supremacy movement, allowing them to accomplish perhaps the most insidious work of all. How we conceive of and describe these women has power, because “it often has spared white conservative women the label of white supremacist.”⁴ They were not Klansmen’s Wives - they were Klanswomen.

Lest we pander to the historical and modern tradition of minimizing white women’s role in white supremacy, the aim of this paper is to highlight how white women are not just sideline witnesses to, but activist creators of oppression. Innumerable authors, both popular and academic, across a variety of fields have expounded on white women’s racism. Within the field of academic history, several are worth deeper mention for how their work serves to bookend and continue the claims of this paper. Beginning prior to emancipation, Stephanie Jones-Rogers’s recently published book *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, documents the enslaved perspective of white women slave owners and seeks to “further upend the myth that white women are innocent of racism.”⁵ By tying white supremacy back to white women’s economically profitable ownership of slaves, Jones-Rogers adds to Thavolia Glymph’s foundational work on women slaveholders, and provides crucial historical context to the

⁴ Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Rebecca Onion, “Female Slaveholders Were Once Viewed as an Anomaly. But New Research Reveals They Were Numerous, Greedy, and Brutal.,” *Slate Magazine*, February 14, 2019, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/02/women-slavery-history-south-book-review.html>; Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women As Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Also see Parul Sehgal, “White Women Were Avid Slaveowners, a New Book Shows,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2019, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/books/review-they-were-her-property-white-women-slave-owners-stephanie-jones-rogers.html>.

narrative thread that this paper seeks to add to.⁶ Moving into the Reconstruction and Redemption era, Karen Cox’s well-known book examines the lasting effects of the Lost Cause ideology on white southern women through the UDC.⁷ Starting in the late 19th century and leading into the first two decades of the 20th century, Cox’s arguments explain the educational strategies of the UDC and how those strategies deeply centered Lost Cause ideology into Southern society. Cox’s work on the UDC’s education efforts thus serves here as a foil, in order to flesh out new revelations about the Women of the Klan. Finally, Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s excellent new book *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* continues white women’s legacy of racism through to their resistance to integration, civil rights struggles, and more broadly, the concept of racial equality. McRae specifically states that to white women, schools were “the political epicenter of their mobilization,” and an “extension of themselves and thus an extension of their values.”⁸ White women did even more than this though – they enabled white supremacy to shift and adjust to the needs of any future era to ensure that white supremacy in America would truly never be that far underground. McRae helps us to understand how white women’s work in education was key to how they crafted a massive resistance at every turn for equality, right up to the busing protests to integration in Charlotte and Boston in the 1970s, the rise of the New Right in the 1980s, and the “school choice” campaign of the 1990s.⁹

Although the WKKK would only last a decade, the story presented here of the little-known Klanswomen and their supremacist impetus for education both fits into and

⁶ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

⁷ Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003).

⁸ McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, 2017.

⁹ McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, 2017.

deepens our historical understanding of the arc of white women's racism and where we are today. These white women's educational outputs remain the organization's most lasting and permanent contribution to institutionalized racism in America. The white women of the Klan used education to secure a legacy of white supremacy and in so doing, aided in facilitating the long-lasting, institutionalized racism of modern America.

CHAPTER 1

INTERNAL INDOCTRINATION

Even before white women organized the WKKK in 1920, the groundwork had already been laid by the KKK for education to be used as a means of establishing American identity as solely a white identity. The Klan did not outline education specifically as a directly defined goal, such as the maintenance of white supremacy and continuing development of the “100% American” citizen. Yet, education was instrumental to the Klan’s ability to attract members, and it manifested itself in two specific ways. First, the Klan’s marketing tactics (such as mass picnics, lectures, rallies, and parades) represented a unique form of education in this era. Although this pedagogy was not formal or codified classroom-style, these tactics had an educational element that the Klan used to draw in members and support, as Linda Gordon argues.¹⁰

Like the men of the Ku Klux Klan, the WKKK placed a high value on their brand of education. The women, however, made their particular racist strain of education an inextricable part of their work and identity as an organization. Through an examination of both the WKKK’s internal indoctrination and external education within the context of similar types of so-called educational efforts by the UDC, we see that the WKKK was in fact exceedingly active in their fight to instill and keep white supremacy a part of the American educational system. Both the UDC and the WKKK viewed education as a primary means of combating the vices of the age and instilling concepts that would

¹⁰ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York, N.Y: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

ensure the continuation of a society that operated by and for white standards. As Karen Cox states, the UDC's work in education "ultimately defined the organization's historical reputation."¹¹ But historians have not sufficiently examined the WKKK's educational efforts, in part due to a traditional focus on the domestic nature of women's involvement in the Klan agenda, which is a dismissal of their true effectiveness.¹² The women of the Klan were hardly ineffective in their education efforts and put a greater emphasis on learning objectives than scholars previously assumed. The entirety of the WKKK's marketing tactics, pamphlets, and public events were educational in nature. Even if the women of the Klan did not label these activities as explicitly scholastic, it is imperative to consider the wide range of methods the WKKK used to accomplish their goals, as the larger motive was to instruct others on the primacy of the Klan cause and the necessity of participation in it.

The WKKK's internal indoctrination consisted of the education of adult Klanswomen as well as youth in children's auxiliaries, similarly to the UDC. This indoctrination served as the foundation and building block upon which external education efforts could be built, as Klanswomen needed to be steeped in white supremacist and nativist ideology in order to effectively communicate that ideology to a broader public. Ultimately, this indoctrination was the underpinning of all of the WKKK's effective education, both internally and externally, and allowed education to be used as a tool of supremacy and racism.

In order to grasp the specific ways the WKKK furthered the cultivation of white supremacy within their own ranks, we must first understand the organization's internal

¹¹ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*.

¹² See David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) for a more traditional history of the Klan that, as Blee notes, underplays and dismisses the role of women in the Klan.

structure that was responsible for creating and implementing these processes. The WKKK instituted a militaristic structure within the organization that included high-level leadership positions responsible for education. The WKKK installed such an educational leadership position in their ranks through the ‘Klokard,’ or Lecturer, in each of its Klan units, and an ‘Imperial Klokard’ as the organization-wide lecturer with the primary responsibility to “disseminate Klancraft.”¹³ This broad definition of the work assigned to the Klokard obscures the truly educational function of the position. Women who held the Klokard position carried out the Klan’s mission by dispersing Klan rhetoric in public lectures and speeches to other Klanswomen and men. Lecturers often traveled throughout a region to give such speeches, as Imperial Lecturer Lucien Trigg Davis did in February of 1935. Davis admonished the crowd in Oklahoma City about the evils of interracial marriage and advocated for capital punishment, both to limit the “threatened absorption of the white race by the Negroes,” and to enforce the continued purity of white America.¹⁴ The Klokard and her Educational Committee participated in the education and indoctrination of new members, developed the program of education for current members, and made decisions regarding content for the education of young members in the auxiliary organizations like the Tri-K Klub. The Educational Committee of the WKKK published pamphlets such as its *Educational Year-Book* to support their scholastic programs. The Klokard fulfilled her duties alongside the supervision and input of the Imperial Commander, as demonstrated by Imperial Commander Robbie Gill Comer’s approved message in the preface of the WKKK’s *Educational Year-Book*.

¹³ *Constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, (Little Rock, AR: Women of the Ku Klux Klan, 1923).

¹⁴ “Marrying of Whites and Negroes Is ‘Worse than Murder’ Says Klan Woman,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, February 13, 1935.

The structure of the UDC was just as militaristic as the WKKK, and although the UDC President-General primarily led the organization, the women who undertook the role of Historian-General more visibly represented the public face of the organization. Like the WKKK's Klokard, well-known Historian-Generals such as Mildred Lewis Rutherford and Laura Martin Rose gave hundreds of speeches across the nation and published transcripts of those speeches along with books, essays, and school primers. Rutherford and Rose in particular pushed for upholding the antebellum South as a place devoid of racial tension and for the role of the KKK as a highly necessary component of Reconstruction.¹⁵ In a vein of work strikingly similar to the WKKK's Klokard and Educational Committee, the UDC's Historian-General and Historical Committee led efforts to reform allegedly anti-South textbooks and curriculum in public schools, created the Children of the Confederacy (CofC), a children's auxiliary, and carefully monitored the content imparted to both the CofC and UDC adult members in meetings.

Military structure in the UDC as well as both the male Klan and women's auxiliary, ensured that ultimate power resided solely in the highest leader, who fought for the spread and dominance of UDC and Klan ideology. The fact that responsibility for these so-called educational goals ultimately resided with the top woman in the organization demonstrated the deep extent to which these goals pervaded the entire system and purpose of the WKKK, and the degree to which she instituted nationwide indoctrination of the public according to Klan precepts.

The WKKK placed a high value on internal indoctrination, as they understood it to be the bedrock for the perpetuation of their ideology. Indoctrination for adult women members of the WKKK emphasized the role of women as wives, mothers, and voters,

¹⁵ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*.

and unsurprisingly as racist and nativist Americans. Pamphlets, such as the *Educational Year-Book*, outlined topics of discussion for each weekly WKKK meeting for the entire coming year. An *Educational Year-Book* from 1921 included such sections as “Women in Politics – Women Hold the Balance of Power,” “The Other Half of Humanity – Woman’s Inferiority a Fiction,” and “Citizenship – Present Deplorable Standards and Tendencies.”¹⁶ But it also included sections on “Women’s New Responsibilities – For the Better Protection of Home” and “Home Making – Domestic Responsibilities,” demonstrating the WKKK’s simultaneously restrictive and conflicting definition of what it meant to be a woman in that age.¹⁷ Each pamphlet broke topics down further into specific and prescribed discussions for each week (for example, regarding the franchise for women: “Women not necessarily controlled by the opinion of men”), allowing maximum control of WKKK members’ education from the top down.¹⁸ This same booklet also included a thirty-eight week section on “The Public School,” influencing the way women perceived, and ultimately used their votes to support, public school development. The “Home Making” section makes clear the consequence and weight the WKKK put on mothers as the raisers of American children. The role the WKKK prescribed for women to have in the mental, physical, and psychological formation of their children, and thus their nation, is evidenced by a five-week section on “Home the Foundation of Government” and individual topics such as “Development of the home into the tribe and the nation.”¹⁹

The UDC Historian-General produced a *Monthly Program* for the UDC women, similar to the WKKK’s *Educational Year-Book*. The *Monthly Program* closely resembled

¹⁶ *Educational Year-Book of the WKKK*, (Little Rock, AR: Women of the Ku Klux Klan, 1921).

¹⁷ *Educational Year-Book of the WKKK*.

¹⁸ *Educational Year-Book of the WKKK*.

¹⁹ *Educational Year-Book of the WKKK*.

the WKKK's production, with a designated topic (or in some cases, military or political hero of Civil War), for each month of the year, and individual discussion questions or topics to be discussed in the meeting. For example, the program dedicated February of 1916 to "Reconstruction Days" and prescribed such topics as "Describe 'The Birth of the Nation'. Is it true to history?" and "Give origin of the Ku Klux Klan".²⁰ Like the WKKK's *Educational Year-Book*, the UDC's *Monthly Program* provided a means for the Historian-General to tightly control the indoctrination of her members and their children.

The *Educational Year-Book* is extraordinarily informative not just because it very clearly lists the WKKK's priorities, but because it gives modern readers a specific and rare glimpse into the contents of the indoctrination of women into the Klan. The creation of both of these educational curriculums and their close resemblance demonstrates that instructing adult members in organizational propaganda was a key goal of both the UDC and the WKKK. The indoctrination of the adult members of the WKKK was a crucial piece of the larger education framework because it underpinned the success of the rest of work they were doing – Klanswomen needed to be instilled with racism and nativism themselves in order to impose that ideology on 1920's society and to accomplish the establishment of white supremacy as the status quo.

Once the women were sufficiently indoctrinated on Klan or UDC ideology, they were equipped to implant hate in the youth of America, in order that white supremacy might be inherited through generations as the accepted practice of white families across the nation. The UDC and the WKKK showed interest in the formation of young minds toward white supremacy through the development of children's auxiliaries. Unlike how the WKKK maintained independence from the male Klan, the children's auxiliaries of

²⁰ Rutherford, *Monthly Programs*.

the UDC and the WKKK were tightly controlled by the women of each organization, organized for the express purpose of safeguarding the perpetuity of racist ideology by cultivating it in youth.

The Children of the Confederacy, abbreviated CofC, formed early impressionable opinions on race when they memorized answers to the *U.D.C. Catechism for Children*. In response to a question regarding what were rights of Southern states (which was asked as a follow up to the questions of what caused the Civil War), children were supposed to reply, “The right to regulate their own affairs and to hold slaves as property.”²¹ The question “How were the slaves treated?” was answered “With great kindness and care in nearly all cases, a cruel master being rare,” and the answer to “What was the feeling of the slaves toward their masters?” was “They were faithful and devoted and were always ready and willing to serve them.”²² They were likewise indoctrinated into Lost Cause mythology by topics presented to them in monthly meetings, as described by the “Children of the Confederacy Program” within the *Monthly Program* UDC-produced pamphlet. Children learned about Stonewall Jackson’s biography in February and learned such topics as “Did Jackson believe in temperance?” and “Did Jackson ever own any negroes?”²³ Children of the Confederacy (and it seems, other school children not in CofC), were taken on field trips. In Columbia, South Carolina, they visited the South Carolina Confederate Relic Room, which was operated by the local Wade Hampton chapter of the UDC. A UDC woman reported giving forty-four speeches at the Relic Room to schoolchildren, distributing pamphlets on the burning of Columbia, and

²¹ Cornelia Branch Stone, *U.D.C. Catechism for Children* (Galveston, TX: United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1912).

²² Stone, *U.D.C. Catechism for Children*.

²³ Rutherford, *Monthly Programs*.

observing an “unusual interest of children from rural districts – 417 children from 44 schools.”²⁴

The Tri-K Klub was the Women of the Klan’s children’s auxiliary for young girls under the age of 18. The initials of the Tri-K Klub each represented a value of the auxiliary – “**T**rust, **R**aces, **I**nfluence, **K**nowledge, **K**indling, **L**eadership, **U**nity, **B**rain-Brawn-Breadth.”²⁵ The Tri-K Klub published instructional pamphlets on each value, and the pamphlet detailing “Races” made the WKKK’s white supremacy clear in its statement that, “if America is to be preserved as a great, free, Protestant country, she must be kept in control of White, American-born, Anglo-Saxon leadership.” It goes on to detail the concerns of the WKKK over the “foreign problem” and the “negro problem,” and does not mince words or simplify topics to a child’s level, when it states “We do not believe that the leadership of the Nation should be given into the hands of colored races...and urge at all times no entangling alliances with the negro race” or when it details the effects of immigrant worker strikes which have cost, “FOR THAT YEAR ALONE...a billion dollars!”²⁶ Of course, the booklet gives a lengthy depiction of the evils that these immigrant workers bring, especially Catholicism, but in this section it also gives a critique of parochial schools and the threat they pose to the democratic system of American public education, urging girls that they must “read and keep informed along these lines. There is a real battle to be fought out here if America is to continue in the hands of Protestant leadership.”²⁷ The girls in the Tri-K Klub were told directly, “The hope of the next generation lies within your hand, young women. You are the mothers of

²⁴ *Minutes of the 33rd Annual Convention, South Carolina Division United Daughters of the Confederacy*, Boylston Family Papers, South Carolinana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

²⁵ *RACES – Tri K Klub* (Little Rock, AR: Tri-K-Klub of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan).

²⁶ *RACES – Tri K Klub*.

²⁷ *RACES – Tri K Klub*.

tomorrow. You are the wives of tomorrow. You are the voters and the Christian women of tomorrow,” and it was their responsibility to secure the “traditions of a great democracy.”²⁸

An element of the educational agenda for youth members of both the Children of the Confederacy and the Tri-K Klub consisted of learning statements that would defend and protect supremacist interests. Among pages of questions detailing military achievements of the South during the Civil War, the Children of the Confederacy also memorized the purpose of the UDC: “To teach their children from generation to generation that there was no stain upon the action of their forefather...and will ever feel that their deathless deeds of valor are a precious heritage to be treasured for all time to come.”²⁹ In a similarly defensive position, the WKKK often maintained they were not racists and that their values did not promote hatred. In a section on how the organization does not owe any allegiance to powers other than the United States Constitution, the WKKK also claimed “nor does it [the WKKK] encourage religious intolerance or stir up racial hatred.”³⁰ By teaching their young participants to defend and shield racist views from those who would oppose them, the UDC and the WKKK anticipated pushback on their goals. By instilling their children with the ability to defend and counter such attacks, the WKKK and UDC preserved their supremacist agenda.

Through the indoctrination of their children these women could ensure the continuation of their specific organization’s ideals and the general premise of white superiority. The children’s auxiliaries represent a crucial component of how the Women of the Klan made use of education-like resources to implement their vision of a pure,

²⁸ *RACES – Tri K Klub*.

²⁹ Stone, *U.D.C. Catechism for Children*.

³⁰ *Women of America! The Past! The Present! The Future!* (Little Rock, AR: Women of the Ku Klux Klan, n.d.).

white America. The WKKK expended great effort to mold and condition these girls during the most formative period of their lives so that they would become women who likewise instilled ideas of white purity and superiority in their children, and those children would form their children's ideas on race. It was an incredibly powerful means of establishing white supremacy as the de facto opinion of white families across the nation, regardless of whether these girls ever became Klan members themselves or were ever involved again tangibly with the Klan.

CHAPTER 2

EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

With internal indoctrination of Klanswomen and Klan children cemented, the WKKK would utilize those members to advocate for the same Klan ideology beyond their own organization, in external education. Public schools were a primary focus of the WKKK's external white supremacy, as evidenced by the number of times public schools are specifically mentioned in WKKK institutional pamphlets and ritual documents. The Klan ritual document, *Kloran, or, Ritual of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, featured a direct and uncompromising stance on public schools as it stated, "We are prepared to do all in our power to protect and promote the welfare of the Public School System, to keep the schools at a high standard of efficiency and to oppose individually and collectively any effort whatever, coming from whatsoever source, to break down its morale or injure its ability to serve our people."³¹ A similarly distributed pamphlet entitled *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, reflects an equally strong stance on the importance of public schools, which is sandwiched between a section on "Racial Ideals" and "Citizenship" that perhaps most clearly of any WKKK literature showcases the racist and nativist underpinnings of all Klan actions. The pamphlet states that public schools are considered an American institution and "to those who seek to undermine or destroy this American

³¹ *Kloran, or, Ritual of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, (Little Rock, AR: Women of the Ku Klux Klan).

institution we say, ‘hands off’, and we will defend this institution against every enemy, whether it be political or ecclesiastical.”³²

The WKKK *Educational Year-Book* from 1921 included an entire section titled “The Public School,” which constituted a full thirty-eight weeks out of the year in specific school-oriented indoctrination for Klanswomen. The section was broken down into six units: “1. Its Origin,” “2. How Supported,” “3. Administration,” “4. As a Safeguard of National Life,” “5. Its Relation to Christianity,” and “6. Departmental Education.” Individual week topics were further broken down into highly specific questions or statements – women in the Klan would have learned in the first section how public schools ought to be funded by a taxation system that all citizens contribute to and in the fourth section how education acts as the “safeguard of the national life” because it, “americanizes the alien elements by teaching them to love and respect American institutions.”³³ Of course, by “our people”, the WKKK was exclusively referring to white Americans, and interestingly, viewed this call to protect public schools as both an organization-wide effort and an effort undertaken by individual Klanswomen, which exponentially expanded the impact of the WKKK. When reviewing such sources as this propagandist pamphlet, it can be tempting to consider the impact on education as limited to these publications and the advocacy of the organization as a whole. However, it is essential to remember the work of individual women as well, which had a considerable influence on conveying Klan educational ideology and is not represented by these mass print sources.

³² *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.*

³³ *Educational Year-Book.*

The WKKK was so invested in public school education partially because it was assumed to be their womanly duty. Education had traditionally been linked to women's work, particularly in the Progressive era, as it was deemed an institution that needed women's supposed domestic and moral values. The WKKK heavily emphasized the role of women as protectors of white society and culture, much like the UDC, who depicted themselves as guardians of a lost white civilization and ideals.³⁴

Despite the commonality that both organizations were interested in influencing public school education, the UDC and the WKKK approaches to public schools diverged, which revealed a conscious class differentiation. The WKKK was actually more intent on maintaining and supporting the public school system for white supremacist goals, whereas the UDC implemented Lost Cause ideology within schools but were not particularly interested in public schools or a public school system. As Karen Cox states, "That the UDC chose to spend its money on college scholarships rather than industrial education suggests that the Daughters sought to preserve class distinction."³⁵ This policy was not without criticism, though – some daughters spoke out against the UDC's lack of assistance to poor whites, based on the thought that by not educating poor whites, the UDC was allowing increasingly educated blacks to supplant them. One UDC member and education reformer, Martha Gielow, wrote, "What good will monuments to our ancestors be if our Southland is to become the land of educated blacks and uneducated whites?"³⁶ The concept of the WKKK as more dedicated to public schools than the UDC does also make sense in light of Gordon's analysis that part of the success of the Klan's spread of racism was dependent on its not actively excluding those poor or middle class

³⁴ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 85.

³⁵ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 84.

³⁶ Quoted in Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 87.

whites that the UDC excluded.³⁷ The WKKK's emphasis on public schools supports Gordon's analysis that the Klan in this era offered a route for its mainly lower middle class and low class whites into the middle class. Women of the Klan viewed America as a land where "even the more galling gyves [shackles] of ignorance were removed and opportunity of intellectual equality [was] granted to all classes by the public schools."³⁸ This demonstrates a clear class difference between the two organizations, and it is conceivable that the WKKK might have actually been more effective in their indoctrination efforts because they were a low-middle class phenomenon and could therefore reach more audiences than the UDC desired to reach.

Among other developments such as member education and children's auxiliaries, the Klan vocally supported the public school system for whites. While the WKKK constitution did not specifically name education as a purpose of the organization, the WKKK repeatedly proclaimed the importance of public schools to the accomplishment of their goals. *Kloran, or Ritual of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* mentions public schools directly, as does *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, and the *Educational Year-Book of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*. The constitution's paucity of references to these forms of education obscures the degree to which Klan members actually discussed education, which they did consistently and vehemently, particularly regarding public schools through Klan newspapers.

Even a cursory scan through many types of Klan-published newspapers, or newspapers supportive of Klan activities, shows a consistent and obvious preoccupation with public schools and government involvement in the American educational system.

³⁷ Gordon, *Second Coming of the KKK*.

³⁸ *The Equality of Women* (Little Rock, AR: Women of the Ku Klux Klan, n.d).

For the duration of the month of May in 1923, the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, the KKK's weekly newspaper out of Atlanta, ran a featured series on public schools. The series consisted of four articles, each taking up an entire page close to the front of the newspaper. The topics were listed in chronological order as: "American Citizens Must Wake to Needs of Public Schools," "Man was Never a Jellyfish" (a response to some public schools teaching evolution), "Education, the Most Valuable Thing in the World, Must Not be Cheapened," and, "Public Schools Should be Carefully Guarded Against Un-American Influences."³⁹ The fact that the *Imperial Night-Hawk* felt compelled to run such a series demonstrates how integral education was to the Klan's broad reaching marketing.

As with many other defining issues for the Klan in the 1920s, the language that papers used to discuss public schools was fear-filled and took on a dire tone in order to press the supposed threat to true American values in the 1920s, which papers defined as Catholicism. Many articles appeared in Klan newspapers with "destruction" or "threat" in the title, and the most recurring topic of the fear-based rhetoric about public schools was the insistence that Catholics were behind the destruction of public school issues. This argument usually manifested either through the idea that Catholics wanted to get rid of the public school system entirely and establish parochial schools (as demonstrated by an article published in the *Kourier* on "Roman Catholic Position on Education"), or more concerning, through a fear that Catholics were taking over public schools and quietly feeding good, white, Protestant children lies.⁴⁰ In the *Fellowship Forum*, an independent

³⁹ "American Citizens Must Wake to Needs of Public Schools," *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 9, 1923; "Man was Never a Jellyfish," *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 16, 1923; "Education, the Most Valuable Thing in the World, Must Not be Cheapened," *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 23, 1923; "Public Schools Should be Carefully Guarded Against Un-American Influences," *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 30, 1923.

⁴⁰ "Roman Catholic Position on Education," *The Kourier*, October 31, 1924.

but Klan-sympathetic newspaper from Washington D.C., an article entitled “Rome in Control of Schools in Larger Cities of Country; Threat to American Ideals” argued that “the hierarchy has absolute control of the public schools in the following large cities of the United States: New York, Chicago, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco.”⁴¹ In large urban centers, Catholics allegedly occupied places of power on school boards and offices, and Catholic teachers had supposedly managed to “inculcate Roman doctrines, insidiously, in the impressionable minds of the children” by reading not the Bible, but books such as “Lives of the Saints,’ ‘Catholic Heroes,’ and ‘Ireland’s Devotion to Nationality.’”⁴² The author argues that through gaining control of the public school system Catholics (often referred to derogatorily as “Rome” or “the hierarchy”) aimed to take control over the entire American government. This demonstrates why the Klan was so vitriolic regarding Catholic presence in education. Ultimately, the threat posed by the suspected Catholic ability to control government and the entirety of America through public schools was why the Klan was so heavily invested in education: if Catholics could control the entire government through public education, so could the Ku Klux Klan.

In order to advance this goal, however, the Klan could not merely characterize public schooling as threatened and imperiled. Public schools needed to also be viewed as the solution to the so-called disappearance of American values. Many news articles make this stance clear, such as “Public Schools Nation’s Defense” and “Public Schools of Vital Importance.”⁴³ An article in the *Imperial Night-Hawk* describing a Wisconsin pastor’s defense of the KKK included his defense of public schools as well. He referred to public

⁴¹ “Rome in Control of Schools in Larger Cities of Country; Threat to American Ideals,” *Fellowship Forum*, February 28, 1925.

⁴² “Rome in Control of Schools in Larger Cities of Country; Threat to American Ideals,” *Fellowship Forum*, February 28, 1925.

⁴³ “Public Schools Nation’s Defense,” *Fellowship Forum*, February 28, 1925; “Public Schools of Vital Importance,” *Imperial Night-Hawk*, October 10, 1923.

schools as an artery “carrying the rich red blood of democracy and freedom to every boy and girl and future citizen.”⁴⁴ Youth were held up and praised for their work in advancing the Klan agenda in public schools. A high school girl, for example, presented a public essay on the evils of immigration as the “greatest danger to country.”⁴⁵ Teachers were likewise held to these standards and accordingly praised when students produced desired results. Alternatively, educators were lambasted when they were seen as imparting wrong morals to children or were not native-born whites.⁴⁶ *The Texas Kourier*’s “Our Public Schools” column details “The Teacher As An Example” – how a poor and respectable small town teacher had “two suits of clothes of good material, but old” that he “cleaned and pressed (by himself),” demonstrating the proper kind of moral example for white Protestant children.⁴⁷

Beyond upholding a white working class image as a symbol of Klan propriety, this column demonstrated the attention given teachers in public schools by the Klan. A 1923 cartoon from the Texas-based newspaper *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* entitled “The School of the Movie” demonstrates the Klan’s concern with teachers and educators in the school system, and that their religious supremacy was not limited to Catholics but included Jews and other non-Protestants as well. The cartoon depicts two children, labeled on their backs “your boy” and “your girl,” watching four teachers on a stage in front of them. Fulfilling a racist and anti-Semitic caricature, a “Prof. Selig” is also titled “Movie Producer” and is seen smiling at a “1st Grade Teacher” with short flapper-style hair, who wears a short puffy skirt with only pasties covering her exposed breasts. Next

⁴⁴ “Wisconsin Pastor Proclaims Klan as Staunch Defender of Protestantism,” *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 16, 1923.

⁴⁵ “High School Girl Outlines Greatest Danger to Country,” *Texas Kourier*, December 5, 1924.

⁴⁶ “Would Bar Aliens as School Teachers,” *Fellowship Forum*, May 9 1923.

⁴⁷ “Our Public Schools,” *Texas Kourier*, December 5, 1924.

to her stands a “2nd Grade Teacher” who holds a baby labeled “Illegitimate Child,” followed by a “3rd Grade Teacher” who is wearing high heels and a short (above the knees) dress with a plunging neckline. She holds a tilting glass of illegal alcohol.⁴⁸ *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* sensationalized Klan fears in dramatic ways, and depictions like these were calculated to shock and dismay parent readers into support of the Klan’s work in public schools. Religious supremacy in this era is a large part of Klan hatred, but it is not a separate issue from race. Religion is deeply tied to race, and the Klan’s fear of Catholics and Jews can be boiled down to their hatred of immigrants and non-whites. The women in particular used religious hate as a smoke screen to distract from their racial hatred and as a way to claim that they were not in fact racist at all, but proper protective Protestant mothers.

The Klan’s support and advocacy for a public school system is rather surprising to modern readers, especially given the criticism of such education by modern conservatives and even the modern Klan. Even more surprising however, is that they were strong advocates for a federal Department of Education. In 1925, the Klan-sympathetic *Fellowship Forum* announced that recently retired U.S. senator Thomas Sterling would take on the role of associate editor of the paper. An acknowledged Klansman himself, Sterling was lauded for his “Sterling-American” plan, which would have established a Department of Education in the federal government under the control of a new Cabinet member to be entitled Secretary of Education.⁴⁹ The bill never came to pass, despite the *Fellowship Forum*’s assurance that Sterling “won the fight.”⁵⁰ This was not the only

⁴⁸ “The School of the Movie”, *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly*, March 24, 1923.

⁴⁹ “Leader in Fight to Create Education Department to Become Associate Editor,” *Fellowship Forum*, March 7, 1925.

⁵⁰ “Leader in Fight to Create Education Department to Become Associate Editor,” *Fellowship Forum*, March 7, 1925.

example of Klan support for a federal Department of Education; the Klan was known to support federal measures as early as 1918 and continuing through at least the 1930's, likely until after the Second World War.⁵¹

Such strong support for federal public education should be understood as a product of the Klan's place in American society during this era. The Klan advocated for public education controlled at the federal level because they felt they had enough power to still affect such top-down control, as their "stronghold [was] in Washington."⁵² The Klan felt confident that their control was solidified as an ingrained element of the normal white American experience, and that Klan activities and agenda were completely normalized into society.⁵³ Unlike many modern conservatives who feel that the government is neither amenable to nor representative of their goals, the Klan of the 1920's was well represented in Washington—150 Klansmen in Congress in 1923 to be exact—and was secure enough in their political influence to support federal level education measures.⁵⁴

The Klan's emphasis on establishing a federal Department of Education stemmed from their beliefs about what public schools should do for American children – indoctrinate them with Protestant and white supremacist ideals, along with arithmetic and home economics. The first article in the May 1923 education series in the *Imperial Night-Hawk* contains a particularly explicit statement that enforces the Klan's true goals for education's reverberating effects on American society. The author states, "We must have

⁵¹ Shayla Lois Marie Mitchell, "A Historical Analysis of the Creation of a Cabinet-Level Department of Education" (Atlanta, GA: University of Georgia State, 2008).

⁵² "Fifteen U.S. Senators Belong to the Ku Klux Klan; Congress Boasts of 150 Members in Order," *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, March 18, 1923.

⁵³ See Gordon, *Second Coming of the KKK*, for an extended analysis of the normalization of Klan ideology.

⁵⁴ "Fifteen U.S. Senators Belong to the Ku Klux Klan; Congress Boasts of 150 Members in Order," *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, March 18, 1923.

a vision beyond our own fireside, and know that we are privileged to have a part in the establishment, through proper education, of real fraternity, white supremacy.”⁵⁵ Other articles are less direct about the Klannish motivation toward education, but still reflect a rhetoric that translates to white supremacy. The “Our Public Schools” column in the *Texas Kourier* in 1924 states, “enlarge the schools and empty the jails, should be our slogan...Character is just mental health. Sound body, sound mind, skillful hands and loving heart – these are the gifts which America is trying to give to every child alike through her public schools.”⁵⁶ Likewise, in the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, a Wisconsin pastor claimed, “destroy the public school and you destroy American democracy... It is the great melting pot where rich and poor, native and foreign born, are put through the mills of true Americanism.”⁵⁷

The Klan’s insistence on the teaching of white supremacist foundations in public schools is not always so explicit. It instead appears as an appeal to true democracy and the development of proper character, teaching children “proper” and “right” morality. The Klan’s own writings highlight that American morality meant sustaining white superiority. This equivalency of “morality,” particularly “American morality,” to white supremacy is exactly why the Klan was so successful in this age, as Gordon argues. But even more importantly, it is the very essence of how Klansmen and women established systemic white supremacy in America. The Klan made American morality a white, Protestant morality. When they referred to true Americans as only white, native-born

⁵⁵ “American Citizens Must Wake to Needs of Public Schools,” *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 9, 1923.

⁵⁶ “Our Public Schools,” *Texas Kourier*, October 31, 1924.

⁵⁷ “Wisconsin Pastor Proclaims Klan as Staunch Defender of Protestantism,” *Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 16, 1923.

Protestants, they coded the term American as white – and they very carefully and systematically made America white.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

By the end of the 1930's, the Second Klan had lost its significant base of power and was declining rapidly amongst a slew of sex and corruption scandals, taking the Women of the Ku Klux Klan with them. WKKK Imperial Commander Robbie Gill Comer and her Klan leader husband were charged with embezzling massive amounts of money – a diamond encrusted crown she is pictured wearing in the printed “Address by the Imperial Commander of the WKKK” reportedly cost up to \$30,000 dollars and she was accused of spending \$70,000 of WKKK money on personal items.⁵⁸ WKKK chapters such as Rose City Klan No. 1 began breaking with national headquarters in Little Rock citing their opposition to Comer and her husband's leadership, particularly the male Klan's attempts at controlling the WKKK.⁵⁹ The WKKK would never revive, as later iterations of the KKK would in post-WWII America. While their shocking and almost inconceivable brand of racist feminism visibly disappeared with them, the impact of their white supremacist education tactics would remain entrenched in American society for decades to come. The ways in which the Women of the Ku Klux Klan furthered their white supremacist goals through internal indoctrination and external education were multi-pronged. Individual women were both instructed in Klan ideology and Klan

⁵⁸ While some secondary sources report the crown costing \$750, another (citing from the court case *Ku Klux Klan v. John Strayer, et.al*) reports it costing \$30,000. Charles C. Alexander, “Defeat, Decline, Disintegration: The Ku Klux Klan in Arkansas, 1924 and After,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1963): 311–31; Jessie Kratz, “Evidence Exposed a Crumbling Klan: KKK v. John F. Strayer et. Al.,” *Pieces of History*, August 26, 2016.

⁵⁹ Alexander, “Defeat, Decline, Disintegration,” 1963.

positions on issues of the era and were held responsible for teaching such ideological foundations to children and the wider society. Children's auxiliaries shaped and formed impressionable young minds to grow into white supremacists, if not Klanswomen themselves. The public school system grew to prominence in large part because of the support these supremacists lent it and the policies they impressed upon it, which were dependent on inherent valuations of racial inequality and powerful white modes of operation. Like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the WKKK's indoctrinating education efforts remain the organization's most lasting impact and permanent contribution to institutionalized racism in America.

In seeing these conservative, and bigoted women of the WKKK fight for their right to vote for white female issues, we see the power and agency these women truly had. The assumption that white women were not involved in the creation of white supremacy denies that any woman was capable of being racist herself—and clearly the Women of the Klan did not need men to inform their racism. It denies womanly involvement in the creation of the Second Klan's hierarchy of hatred, but more importantly it denies women's vital role in the creation of modern racism in America. An understanding of how women insidiously and powerfully used education to assist in creating the racist system of American operation, which has not yet been dismantled, is essential to understanding what American racism looks like today. While many studies have confronted the culpability and complicity of the white man, this study adds to the growing body of work that acknowledges the white woman.

The WKKK and their indoctrinating endeavors at education matter in the present because assumptions persist that white women were merely involved in organizing picnics, not organizing a system of racism. Alternatively, many assume that if white

women were activists, they were liberal suffragettes advocating for justice and equality. This study of the WKKK dispels both of these notions. As Elizabeth Jones-Rogers discusses in her Slate interview with Rebecca Onion, the ability of American white women to be activist agents of hate and violence is not shocking to European scholars, but repeatedly shocks both American scholars and the American public.⁶⁰ Despite the exploding number of popular articles written about white women, this widespread shocked reaction demonstrates a continuing need to reveal histories like those of the WKKK to the public eye, because we clearly still need to hear that racism is not only a white man's concept. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae writes that white women's "gender – and by extension, their familiarity with oppression – does not keep them from becoming oppressors."⁶¹ White women enacted oppression via white supremacy on people of color in order to maintain control in a power struggle.

The story of the WKKK serves to remind us that when white supremacy takes hold, it is not white women who suffer harm. When women finally obtained the right to vote in 1920 it was at the cost of women of color. When white women made use of white supremacy – such as utilizing Klan promotional and monetary support - to further their own enfranchisement, they institutionalized processes of white supremacy and forever bought into white power systems.⁶² When white women campaigned for public schools and a federal Department of Education to control its whiteness, people of color and immigrants learned that in America freedom was not equal. When UDC women authored

⁶⁰ Rebecca Onion, "Female Slaveholders Were Once Viewed as an Anomaly. But New Research Reveals They Were Numerous, Greedy, and Brutal.," Slate Magazine, February 14, 2019, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/02/women-slavery-history-south-book-review.html>.

⁶¹ McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, 2017.

⁶² Carrie Chapman Catt was one of such female suffragettes who claimed that getting the right to vote was only for white women. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae quotes her "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by white women's suffrage," in her New York Times op-ed "The Women Behind White Power" published on February 2, 2018.

textbooks, demanded control of curriculum, and hung portraits of Robert E. Lee next to George Washington in schools, it cost young black children their history and the dignity of their ancestors' struggle. When those UDC and Klanswomen's daughters grew up to protest school integration with signs and by chasing down black schoolgirls while screaming obscenities, it cost women of color their humanity. And when white mothers of resistance raised their own girls to believe that school choice would maintain proper racial hierarchies, they believed it was their duty to carry this racially-coded fight straight into the 21st century. This is how white women have institutionalized both their racism and their white privilege and coded it as Americanism. Productive conversations about the historical roots of American racism must include the direct impact of white women, and in order for any deconstruction of racism to begin to occur, white women must once and for all recognize how their ancestors raised America racist.

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