Panel: “France and United States as Works in Progress”

Carmen Hamilton

Title: “Writing Out Hate: How an Infiltrator Weakened a 1940’s Resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan”

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Paper written for: History A315: U. S. History, 1945 to Present (Fall 2014)

Carmen Hamilton is an IPFW junior pursuing a B.A. in History, and certificates in psychological research and international studies. With no prior interest in comic book heroes, Carmen’s research for this paper began as an effort to test the validity of an Episode of Comedy Central’s Drunk History, “Drunk History Atlanta: Stetson Kennedy Infiltrates the KKK.”

Abstract

This paper will explain how a southern folklorist played an instrumental role in preventing a nationwide spread of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1940’s, and in teaching a generation of young radio-listeners to take a stand against prejudice and hate. Following World War Two, the KKK attempted a nationwide resurgence, led by the Klan chapter in Atlanta, Georgia. Stetson Kennedy, who for $10 purchased a white robe and infiltrated the Atlanta Klan under a false name, revealed secret information, such as meeting times and locations, hit lists, and sources of funding, to local and federal investigators, as well as to the writers of the popular radio program “Superman.” In a series of sixteen episodes titled “Superman and the Clan of the Fiery Cross” the caped hero battled a group of fictional villains modeled after the KKK. Thanks to Kennedy, the Klan’s prejudice and attempts to gain power were brought to nationwide attention: its non-profit status was revoked, and its members humiliated when their activities and rituals were revealed and mocked on a children’s radio program.

Bibliographical Note

Primary sources on the Ku Klux Klan and the Superman radio program include books by Stetson Kennedy himself, Southern Exposure (1946) and The Klan Unmasked (1954), a 1990 interview with Kennedy, relevant newspaper and magazine articles published in Life, Time, Newsweek, the St. Petersburg Times, and Labor News and Comment, as well as a collection of Stetson Kennedy’s papers (1936-1978) and the original “Clan of the Fiery Cross” radio transcripts, both available online to the public. Secondary sources include a paper by Peggy Bulger, “Stetson Kennedy: Applied Folklore and Cultural Advocacy,” a book by National Geographic historian Rick Bowers, Superman Versus the Ku Klux Klan (2012), and Hooded Americanism (1987) by David M. Chalmers.