In 1985, I began a series of interviews with Judy Clark, a 1960s radical serving a 75-year to life prison sentence. Over three decades, the project evolved into a four-nation, longitudinal study of clandestine organizations, political violence, and New Left protest. This self-reflexive narrative essay revisits the study’s psychodynamic origins, and illustrates how fantasy was a motivational force in selecting the research subject. It uses the psychoanalytic concept of “splitting” to explain how Clark and the cohort of women engaged in insurgency politics tried to balance the irreconcilable demands of their obligations as a revolutionary and their personal lives as wives, daughters, and mothers. It describes how processes of transference and counter-transference operated in building a transformative relationship between Clark and myself through which Clark began to address this “split” and nurture parts of a “new” self. Finally, the essay reveals how disciplinary pressures and incentives within academic sociology and, more specifically, in the field of social movement research, suppressed—but could not erase—the psychodynamic dimensions of the study.

Acting out

On October 20, 1981, a small racially mixed group of radicals led by the Black Liberation Army attempted to rob 1.6 million dollars at gun-point from a Brinks truck in Nyack, New York. When the action went awry, one Brinks guard and two police officers were killed. Two men and two women were apprehended while fleeing the scene. Several others escaped.

Of the four initial suspects, three—Kathy Boudin, David Gilbert, and Judy Clark—had been high-profile dissidents in the radical student and
anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s. In 1969, they joined a small splinter group called the “Weathermen.” While the mass movement receded, this faction redoubled their commitment to insurgency politics and turned to violence. The Weathermen’s place in infamy was secured in 1970 when an attempt at bomb manufacturing went awry, killing three members and blowing to bits the New York City townhouse where they had been hiding. When the Weathermen disbanded in 1977, Judy Clark persisted. With others, she founded the May 19th Communist Organization, a group of white revolutionaries even smaller in size than the Weathermen and composed mainly of women who supported Third World guerrilla movements and US-based Black and Puerto Rican nationalist movements. Boudin and Gilbert remained underground, and maintained associations with this group.

For myself, as for some of my contemporaries living in New York—all veterans of the 60s turned professionals in the 80s—the Brinks defendants’ crimes evoked intense responses. We were astonished to learn that members of the Weathermen and Black Liberation Army—an urban guerrilla group formed in 1971 after the Black Panther Party dissolved—had survived an entire decade. We were repulsed by the violence. We were outraged by their claims to have “expropriated” the Brinks money for the purpose of creating a “Republic of New Afrika” and to have killed two police officers and a guard in “self-defense.”

Did the radicals actually believe that a separate nation, comprised of five former slave states in the South, was the solution to racism in America? In 1981? Or were their claims to building a black nation merely a cover-up for genuinely criminal motives? Even more intriguing were the motivations of the women participating in the action. The alliance between the black men—a cabal of radicals, Muslims, and ex-convicts—and the white women was fraught with confusing innuendo. Was ideological conviction the only connection between them? Had feminist criticisms of male-dominated, violent models of revolution completely missed these women?

“Brinks” remained in the headlines for months. During that time, my friends and I established a ritual. We met in a Greenwich Village cafe after work, sipped cappuccinos, read the dailies out loud, and tried to predict tomorrow’s headline about which character in the Weather Underground or the BLA would be arrested next and which act of criminal incompetence would lead the FBI to their doorstep. It was difficult for those of us who had “known” the radicals to contain our sarcasm and disparaging comments. But beneath the outrage, Brinks had tapped into a well of anxiety not only about those who were “still at it,” but about ourselves who weren’t.