

How “Karen” Proliferates White Patriarchal Supremacy Through Her Mobilization of Intersectional Privilege

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Introduction

“Karen” memes have proliferated over the internet in recent years for their scandalous and comedic value as brazen displays of entitlement by White women in public spaces. Even superficially, however, patterns of harassment can be discerned between seemingly unconnected “Karen Moments” across the United States. The victims of harassment were always engaged in mundane activities, were nearly always people of Color, and were always within spaces open to the public. The “Karens” always imposed themselves on a situation they had no relation to or authority over. Similarly, on most occasions, the “Karen” involved called 911 when their demands were ignored.

Research Questions & Conceptual Framework

- (1) How do these “Karen Moments” serve to evidence historically-based racial and gendered privilege through their duality of aggression and White tears?
- (2) How do these micro-level “Karen Moments” parallel macro-level phenomena within the United States society and institutions when analyzed through the lens of symbolic interactionism?

In order to analyze “Karen Moments” the conceptual framework brings together the following topics:

- ❖ Critical race theory
- ❖ The construction of Whiteness in the United States
- ❖ The social construction of Blackness as criminal in the United States
- ❖ The increase and normalization of domestic inter-civilian surveillance
- ❖ The binary and impunity of White patriarchy & White womanhood
- ❖ The intersectional privilege of white womanhood and its mobilization of the ‘damsel in distress’ trope in order to exert power
- ❖ Critiques of such behaviors by intersectional feminism

Methodology

This research selected three high-profile “Karen Moments” in the past four years which all shared similarities of location, interaction, and methods used by the “Karens” to attempt to impose their will. Utilizing qualitative textual analysis, a thorough review of each “Karen” video was conducted to identify themes according to the literature, revealing how these micro-level interactions paralleled the macro-level societal trends through the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

Data: Selected “Karen” Videos

“BBQ Becky”

Fig. 1. Jennifer Schulte harassed Black folks barbecuing at Lake Merritt in Oakland, California for allegedly violating park code, calling for emergency police intervention for over an hour in 2018.



“Permit Patty”



Fig. 2. Alison Ettel called the police on Jordan Rogers, an eight-year-old Black child selling cold water on a hot day on the sidewalk, for not having a permit in San Francisco, California in 2018.

“Central Park Dog Walker”

Fig. 3. Amy Cooper responded to birdwatcher Chris Cooper’s requests that she put her dog on a leash by screaming at him and calling the police to the scene, claiming that an African American man was “threatening her life” in New York City, New York in 2020.



Data Analysis

Exceptional citizenry in the U. S. security state:

The neoliberalist government of the United States has extended the duty of protecting national exceptionalism to its White citizens, who are tasked with preserving law and order in mundane and public spaces.

Mobilization of Blackness as “criminal” as constructed by American Whiteness:

The construction of Whiteness in the United States has positioned itself as the opposite of the perceived criminality of people of Color.

Invocation of law enforcement and legal authority:

Due to racial status, White women perceive themselves as entitled to utilizing the historically racially-established tools of law enforcement to support their desires.

Mobilization of White tears & the damsel in distress trope:

When racial privilege is not sufficient to control a situation, White women may employ White tears to shift narratives and claim victimhood, in order to further villainize others, benefit from social protection, and avoid blame.

Conclusions & Future Research

These “Karen Moments” serve as evidence of complex and historic trends of power, privilege, race, and gender, usually ignored by many in favor of their comedic value. They showcase a myriad of dynamics that involve and position self-deputization, authority, legitimacy, White power, racial hierarchy, and established gender norms together. Analyzed through the theory of symbolic interactionism, which positions micro-interactions and perceptions as the basis for macro-level social trends and patterns, these behaviors were demonstrated to parallel historical societal construction of White femininity, American Whiteness, and the proliferation of the security state in the United States in which White identities are implicitly deputized to preserve a racialized understanding of law and order in public spaces. Future research could examine other trends in popular culture, such as the “Karen Moments” described in this analysis, to determine how intersectional power is mobilized by everyday citizens under the guise of maintaining public safety. Additionally, researchers could analyze how the virtual dissemination of such instances of privilege and harassment may be a challenge to the longstanding impunity of White womanhood through visibility and social consequences.

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