Black Memes Matter: #LivingWhileBlack With Becky and Karen

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Abstract
“BBQ Becky” and “Karen” memes reference real-world incidents in which Black individuals were harassed by White women in public spaces. In what I term the BBQ Becky meme genre, Black meme creators use humor, satire, and strategic positioning to perform a set of interrelated social commentaries on the behavior of White women. By conducting a visual Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) of BBQ Becky memes, I argue that Becky and Karen memes are a cultural critique of White surveillance and White racial dominance. I find that memes in the BBQ Becky meme genre call attention to, and reject, White women’s surveillance and regulation of Black bodies in public spaces — making an important connection between racialized surveillance of the past and contemporary acts of “casual” racism. This meme genre also disrupts White supremacist logics and performative racial ignorance by framing Karens and Beckys as racist—not just disgruntled or entitled. Finally, in a subversion and reversal of power dynamics, Karen and BBQ Becky memes police White supremacy and explicitly call for consequences, providing Black communities with a form of agency. Hence, I conclude that Black memes matter in the struggle for racial equity.

Keywords
BBQ Becky, Karen, memes, race, White supremacy

The summer of 2020 highlighted the inability to live while Black in the United States. Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Robert Fuller, and Malcolm Harsch were not allowed to live beyond 2020 because they were Black. With each new publicized death, Black communities face apparent powerlessness and the knowledge that White police officers and civilians may take a life at any given moment. Unchecked and deadly White supremacy has made clear that post-racial America is a myth. White citizens have become comfortable with the social power afforded by hegemonic White supremacy. 

White individuals use their privilege and power to ensure that Black citizens conform to White notions of civility through casual acts of White supremacy such as calling the police on a Black family for having a picnic in a public park. White women, in particular, use (or threaten to use) police force to discipline Black people for disrupting their comfort and power in public spaces. In this article, I argue that White women engage an extralegal type of patrolling, policing, and surveillance to regulate Black bodies in public spaces and uphold White supremacist notions of law and order. Becky and Karen memes represent a collective reaction to this policing. These memes create counternarratives that subvert White supremacist action and call for restitution for unlawful acts and instances of racial harassment.

In May 2020, the threat of police violence was used against a Black man, Christian Cooper, in Central Park. Amy Cooper, or “Central Park Karen,” ironically, was upset about being called out for violating a pet leash rule and responded by invoking the threat of police force. While using her White privilege in an attempt to ensure a Black man conformed to her will, she stated, “I’m taking a picture and calling the cops . . . I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life” (Vera & Ly, 2020). Christian Cooper was not threatening her life, but the lie is undergirded by layers of coded race relations. In that moment, Amy Cooper relied on centuries-old racialized fears that paint White women as vulnerable to the brutish, oversexualized Black man (Collins, 2002). In prevailing racialized tropes, White women are to be protected at all costs, even if the cost is the Black man’s life (e.g., Emmitt Till). The danger that
underlies such a threat—to call the police and say that a Black man is threatening one’s life—cannot be overstated in our current political and historical moment. Yet, the frequency of such calls to police about Black individuals who are somehow violating “rules,” which are unknown to the rest of society, is growing rapidly.

“BBQ Becky,” “Permit Patty,” “Bus Berater Brenda,” “Lawn Mower Lucy,” “Pool Patrol Paula,” “Racist Roslyn,” “Burrito Bill,” “Jogger Joe,” “Walmart Mary,” “Airline Amy,” “Road Raging Randy,” “Loud Music Maggy,” and “Candy Bar Cora” all refer to memeified incidents occurring in the past two years in which White individuals called (or threatened to call) the police on Black individuals for living while Black. These quotidian acts of White supremacy have become so normative that popular discourse fails to recognize them as acts of White violence. Black discourse in the digital public, however, repeatedly call out and frame the actions of White individuals as racist acts that work to uphold existing standards of hegemonic Whiteness. Memes associated with the #LivingWhileBlack trend produce a counternarrative about White Supremacy in the digital public sphere. These memes contribute to a wider collective conversation that leads to legal changes and often results in job loss for Bekys and Karens.

Although I collected data on over 89,000 tweets from various #LivingWhileBlack moments, in this article, I present a Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2018) of approximately 15,000 BBQ Becky tweets and related memes from Twitter users. My analysis reveals three dominant frames: (1) social commentary on everyday policing of Blackness; (2) connections with historical iterations of White supremacist surveillance; and (3) a focus on White tears, fears, hostility, and privilege. Together, the BBQ Becky meme and #LivingWhileBlack hashtag suggest that Black memes matter. The circulation of BBQ Becky memes engendered social change offline by helping to draw attention to a pattern of abuse of 9-1-1 and police resources. Several states have since moved to create laws which make it illegal to call the police due to a racially motivated event.

In what follows, I provide an intentionally brief overview of the events preceding the BBQ Becky meme moment and outline the theoretical background underpinning my argument. I draw from critical cultural studies, sociology, and communications literatures to highlight the importance of Becky and Karen memes. Next, I review existing meme research, with attention toward racialized memes and social justice memes. In the Methods Section, I provide an explanation of my visually based method, CTDA, and detail how tweets were sourced and analyzed. Ultimately, I find that BBQ Becky memes are a cultural critique of White surveillance and White racial dominance. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of Bekys, Karens, and the shifting public consciousness about White supremacy.

Becky and Karen

A “Becky” has been defined by Urban Dictionary as “a stereotypical, basic White girl; obsessed with Starbucks [and] Uggs boots.” A “Karen” is described as a “middle aged woman, typically blonde, [who] makes solutions to others’ problems an inconvenience to her although she isn’t even remotely affected” (Becky, 2016; Karen, 2020). Both have become shorthand for White entitlement in popular culture and the American mediascape (Hunt, 2020). For this study, my framing of Karen and Becky centers on social power that is afforded because of race. A Becky or Karen is any White woman who exercises her power to police, surveil, and regulate Black individuals in public spaces.

While there has been an abundance of Becky- and Karen-related activity in recent news, I focus on the incident that spawned this particular meme genre—BBQ Becky. On April 29, 2018, Jennifer Schulte, a White woman, called the police on a Black family having a picnic in a city-sanctioned grilling zone at a park in historically Black Oakland, California. Schulte claimed that while grilling in the park was legal, it was illegal to use charcoal in the particular zone where she encountered, disrupted, and harassed the family over the course of 2 hr. After an explicitly racialized exchange with the 9-1-1 dispatcher, Schulte fled the scene, all while being recorded by a courageous bystander. In the ensuing days, a series of memes emerged that nicknamed Schulte, “BBQ Becky.” The BBQ Becky memes use alliteration, humor, and satire to draw attention to the White woman who acted as a White supremacist vigilante to call the police on a Black family for doing an everyday activity, having a picnic in a public park or living while Black.

The encounter was filmed and uploaded to YouTube. Less than a week later, images of Schulte on the phone were placed into everyday contexts in which Black people were harmlessly enjoying their lives (Lee, 2018; Mohdin, 2018). The BBQ Becky meme is characterized by Black people engaged in an activity, Schulte positioned to the side, with the phone to her ear, calling the police. For instance, a popular BBQ Becky meme features the Obamas engaged in a BBQ by Schulte who is depicted calling the police on an “unknown” Black couple leaving the Whitehouse. In another example, BBQ Becky is seen calling the police on Martin Luther King Jr. Most of the memes feature BBQ Becky calling the police on Black people in the mundane.

Just a few weeks prior, two Black men had been arrested for “loitering” without making a purchase at a Philadelphia Starbucks. The debacle sparked international outrage. This incident highlighted an alternative frame for BLM (Black Lives Matter) activists. Previously, BLM movement actors focused primarily on the unlawful and unethical deaths and imprisonment of Black individuals at the hands of the police. However, the Starbucks arrest and BBQ Becky incident offered a new avenue of conversation about the inability to live and move freely while Black in what are perceived as
predominantly White public spaces. Using the hashtag #LivingWhileBlack, Twitter users lamented the inability to exercise their civil liberties in public spaces in the same manner as White individuals.

In the two years following the emergence of BBQ Becky, I tracked the development of 15 separate #LivingWhileBlack incidents, all of which have become memes that mock the perpetrators. After I finished collecting data for this project, Central Park Karen emerged as yet another memeified documentation of White people casually exercising White supremacy. Each of these humorous sounding names refers to a situation similar to the one described above wherein a White individual targeted and harassed a Black person or groups of Black people for existing in White spaces—often playing on insidious racial politics in the process.

The memes in this study represent a departure from mainstream internet meme culture in that they act as a stand in for news coverage of real-life events. Each new Karen or Becky episode represents an actual altercation. Therefore, I examine the actions of White actors through a number of theoretical lenses: bringing critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and theories of racial ignorance to bear on racialized, imminent violence at the hands of (primarily) White women.

**White Women + White Supremacy**

In *Darkwater*, Du Bois (2003) declared, “What on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it? ’Then always somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” (p. 56). Whiteness indeed entails ownership and is positioned in American society as a central, unmarked normative fact; the standard by which all other walks of life are positioned and judged (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Frankenberg (1993) describes Whiteness as a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (p. 1)

Using these definitions of Whiteness, White supremacy can be positioned as inherent to Whiteness. Put simply, I define White supremacy as the idea that White people believe they are superior to others, enabling them to be the standard by which others are judged in society. White supremacists hold an implicit or explicit belief that White superiority is the natural social order and work to uphold it. A complementary conception of White Supremacy frames it as “a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of White subjects are continually placed centre stage and assumed as ‘normal’” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 318). This exercise of power encompasses “the multitude of ways in which people who are identified as ‘white’ enjoy countless, often unrecognized, advantages in their daily lives” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 319), including the racialized nature of policing, credit worthiness evaluation, education, political processes, and the ability to enjoy public spaces freely.

Whiteness and White supremacy are historically entangled with notions of what we consider to be public spaces. The field of racial and spatial studies positions public spaces as a mirror reflecting the racialization of a particular society (Neely & Samura, 2011). Historically, minoritized racial groups have been controlled and regulated through the marking of public space (Nelson, 2008); hence, “space is not simply a setting, but rather it plays an active role in the construction and organization of social life” (Neely & Samura, 2011, p. 1936). Segregation, red lining, block busting, and gentrification have all played a role in how certain spaces are signaled as Black or White. These tools, tactics, and/or processes are means of controlling where Black bodies do or do not belong—offering further ideological support of the idea that Whiteness dictates the highest power of law and that White individuals have social power to patrol, police, and regulate Black bodies in public spaces. This learned pattern of behavior is a societal leftover from the Jim Crow era of segregation, and before that, the era of chattel slavery in the United States.

In the past, Black bodies were controlled in public spaces by threats of violence, lynching, and routine, targeted racialized terror that dictated who Black people could speak to, where they were allowed to live, and in which spaces they were able to exist (DeFina & Hannon, 2011; Finkelman, 1992). At present, the routine act of calling the police on Black people in public spaces extends this historical practice of regulating Black bodies to maintain White supremacist order. With each meme and corresponding incident, it becomes clearer that White supremacist actors recognize the logical outcome of their threats of violence, yet they claim that they are engaging in civil duties. Papacharissi (2004) argues that in the United States, this conception of civility is tied to American democracy ideals and notions of what it means to be a good citizen—ideals that were formulated by White, slave owning founding fathers. Accordingly, White actors who phone the police to report Black people in the name of civic duty, call upon this outdated understanding of civility. This kind of civility, associated with “good manners” and participation in public life, is also linked to the kind of behaviors that White society considers acceptable. Rudick and Golsan (2018) offer further explanation on civility as a White concept and set of beliefs; Whiteness-informed civility “functions to create a good White identity, functions to erase racial identity, and functions to assert control of space” (2017, p. 1). Hence, civility can also be weaponized to meet White supremacist desires to regulate Black bodies.

The ruse of White civility can also be used to distance racist actors from personal responsibility of a racist act. Amy Cooper (Central Park Karen) can be heard saying “I’m taking a picture and calling the cops . . . I’m going to tell them there’s an
African American man threatening my life.” Cooper’s subsequent apology, “I am not a racist. I did not mean to harm that man in any way,” is directly oppositional to one another and follows a long line of racist actions followed by strategic distance creating tactics, including a lackluster and underwhelming, yet civil apology. Polite and empty apologies are a tactic deployed by White women when trying to evade racial guilt and the stigma associated with open racism.

White women have routinely attempted to create distance between their own personal Whiteness and accountability for both systemic racism and individual acts of racism. In They Were Her Property, Jones-Rogers (2019) explains this disconnect amid the American slave trade: “it [is] clear that white southern women knew the ‘most obnoxious features’ of slavery all too well. Slave-owning women not only witnessed the most brutal features of slavery, they took part in them, profited from them, and defended them” (p. ix). Just as White women benefited directly from participating in American slavery, they also benefit from colorblind racism which denies the recognition of race-based oppression while holding the belief that race does not matter, expressing racial ignorance, and refusing to “see color” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Jennifer Mueller’s (2019) Theory of Racial Ignorance (TRI) assumes racial ignorance persists as a broad social phenomenon by virtue of White people’s militant commitment to an epistemology of ignorance: a way of knowing oriented toward evading, mystifying, and obscuring the reality of racism to produce (mis)understandings useful for domination. (p. 147)

White ignorance of racism is effortful and implies an unwillingness to acknowledge abundant evidence of racism. This effortful unwillingness pervades the US mediascape surrounding race and produces a hegemonic discourse about navigating race with little personal responsibility. We witness effortful ignorance with the emergence of each new Becky and/or Karen. Their calls to police use explicit racial serotyping to threaten Black lives while claiming that their own race does not matter. Mueller argues that this type of effortful ignorance has the goal of maintaining White supremacy by evading antiracist critique: “Racial cognition [is] a process in which White thinkers resist racial knowing to construct a distorted reality so they can perform, abide by, and enjoy the spoils of racism without being racist” (Mueller, 2019, p. 158). These covert acts of White supremacy are evidentiary of a larger, collective hegemonic power that controls narratives about what constitutes a racist act.

Ultimately, racist ideology and racial ignorance are two sides of the same coin as both work together to limit the agency, power, and freedom of Black people by upholding racist social systems. White women are actively invested in maintaining the current power structure because they benefit from it (Carby, 1982; Collins, 2002). Because White women are depicted as the nurturing, kind, quiet, pinnacle of virtuosity in the Western world, their status in society is protected by patriarchy (Carby, 1982). White women, even White feminists, perpetuate patriarchal myths of innocence because the continuation of these myths is directly related to their success (Crenshaw, 1993). Jessie Daniels (2021) writes: White women’s ability to enact violence was provisional, available to them primarily through their relationships with white men who were their fathers, husbands, brothers, brothers-in-law and cousins. Today, white women have more direct access to all kinds of power because of the feminist movement.

But their inability to recognize how they use their power to silence and harm Black people is an ongoing social ill. White women maintain the posture that they as individuals are not guilty of racism. Yet, though the White women who call police on Black individuals are not actors of the law, their actions buttress lawful attempts to surveil and control Black bodies. Performed innocence implies guiltlessness from past sins of slavery and refuses to acknowledge individual action in perpetuating racist systems and stereotypes.

What’s in a Meme?

Over the past decade, scholars have worked with some difficulty to define internet memes and meme culture. The term “meme” was originally coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins (2016) to connote an element of culture that passes from person to person by copying or imitation (Gal et al., 2016). Internet memes have the same properties as pre-digital memes; however, they are shared more quickly and have further reach because of the internet (Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Though the following is a contested definition, internet memes are generally described as groups of items sharing common characteristics of content and form dispersed through digital collectives (Shifman, 2013). As cultural units, memes operate on norms and are subjected to the following stipulations: memes follow a particular cultural logic; memes are inherently participatory; and memes are culturally situated and dependent on context (Shifman, 2014). Memes are open to interpretation and invite participatory remix (Vickery, 2017). Gal and colleagues (2016) note that memes and norms are typically co-created alongside one another and argue that the circulation of a meme performs acceptance of the message being communicated.

Scholars note that memes are created with virability in mind—they are imbued with intertextuality that insures they will spread and replicate over time (Aitwani, 2017; Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Milner, 2016). Some evaluate a meme based on its ability to spread across broader popular culture and capture news media attention (Aitwani, 2017; Knobel & Lankshear, 2005). Most notably, as far as this article is concerned, memes are never created in a vacuum and are dependent on interconnected systems of cultural units expressed
through layered representation (Cannizzaro, 2016; Castaño Díaz, 2013). These layers are negotiated by individuals who contribute to a collective cultural experience (Aitwani, 2017). Hence, internet memes are cultural artifacts that provide insight about the cultures that create them. They can also do the ideological work of communicating information about a subculture to the broader pop culture zeitgeist (Aitwani, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

Milner (2014) argues that memes have a language that communicates a particular status within a subculture and can grant cultural capital within that subculture (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). For example, LOLcats, though appearing silly and humorous, has changed the participatory mediascape. The entertainment provided by LOLcats memes propelled the subculture to the forefront of American internet culture. Milner (2014) attributes this widespread circulation of LOLcats to the intertextual references positioned by users. Beyond internet aesthetics, Chen (2012) argues that memes relay a communing with the subversive. Users enjoy the ability to critique and poke fun at dominant cultural norms. In this way, memes critique dominant cultural logics.

In the United States, memes have been shown to communicate norms about religion, masculinity, gender, race, and other aspects of social life and social identities. Once memes make it into the dominant popular culture mediascape, they are often adopted by advertisers, celebrities, and other culture brokers—furthering their dominance and consumption in American mediascapes (Shifman, 2014). Race and racialized memes are most relevant to the BBQ Becky meme genre. Scholars doing work in this area position memes as active sites of racialized negotiation (Milner, 2013b), argue that they can be used as microaggressions or express overt racism (Williams et al., 2016), extend colorblind ideologies (Yoon, 2016), that they can convey racialized collective identities (Eschler & Menking, 2018), and that they can do ideological shifting work on race (Milner, 2013b) and intersectionality (Breheny, 2017). Notably, Dickerson (2016) finds that memes about sports represent “a form of racial ideology that is representative of White backlash politics,” demonstrating that subcultures have the power to extend White racial politics and uphold White supremacist ideologies: “These memes use the bodies of Black and White male athletes to produce and reproduce ideologies of race and gender” (p. 3). Sports memes make commentary about race without any overt references to race due to preexisting racial stereotypes present in sports. Dickerson frames this implicit bias and race-based meaning making within Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) conception of colorblind racism. In Dickerson’s view, sports-based memes operate on implicit racial ideologies. The humorous nature at the front end of the memes obscures the racial politics that drive the humor. Yet, the memes in his study contrast with the memes at the center of this study because race is a critical and explicit reference point. Race and gender are primary aspects of the BBQ Becky meme genre. The real-life incident which spawned the memes is also an explicitly racist interaction that has been caught on camera.

These initial explorations of the racialization and political actions of memes have laid the groundwork for this study. However, there is a dearth of research focusing on the intersections of race and social activism in meme genres. In the next section, I engage the literature on activist memes and explore how activist memes activate social change.

Political and Activist Memes

Scholarship on activist and political memes is varied across definitions of activism and politics yet there is agreement that memes are “a medium through which people may agitate for political change or more deeply engrained reactionary attitudes” (Frazier & Carlson, 2017, p. 1). In Lievrouw’s (2006) conceptualization, activist memes represent an element of participatory new media culture that intervenes in, and responds to, mainstream media culture (p. 1). Political and activist memes can produce alternative narratives, new meaning, political groupings (Frazier & Carlson, 2017; Gal et al., 2016), and have demonstrated power to influence social movements (Hristova, 2014; Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019). For example, Turkish youth created protest art memes in the Gezi Park movement that extended literacy of political processes and helped communicate marginalized political perspectives (Bozkuş, 2016).

Memes also do boundary work that relies on performance and negotiation of culturally significant norms and values that are present in everyday images (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Frazier & Carlson, 2017; Gal et al., 2016). For instance, the Pepper Spray Cop meme was widely circulated during Occupy Wallstreet and revealed opposing myths of the American Dream (Bozkuş, 2016; Huntington, 2016; Milner, 2013a; Sci & Dare, 2014). Similarly, Baker and colleagues (2020) find that memes depicting Vladimir Putin as a gay icon serve as both a critique of Putin and also of gay rights in Russia:

The queered image of Putin . . . presents a shift in the representational and sexual politics of Putin’s Russia. The RF’s response to the meme signals a new effort by Putin to legally regulate the sexual status of his globally recognizable media celebrity (p. 210).

Their findings suggest that memes have such great power to shift political discourse that those with political power actively work to curtail discourse spurred by political memes. Memes have also played a role in US electoral politics. According to Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019), the 2016 campaign season memes represent a grassroots attempt to shift political ideologies. Grassroots political memes offered some power against prevailing mainstream political views (Graeff, 2015). They also served to accentuate and diversify visual representations of presidential hopefuls, ensuring that
candidates did not have complete control of their own political image (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019).

In their analysis of far-right German memes, Bogerts and Fielitz (2019) note that topics cluster around racial identity, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, national identity, and political ideologies associated with immigration. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Australian Indigenous peoples use memes to create a collective consciousness that pushes against the continued Australian colonialism. The creation and spread of Indigenous memes offered opportunities to connect emotionally, work through collective histories, and to “produce new political arrangements” around Indigenous identity (Frazer & Carlson, 2017, p. 9). These works provide evidence that memes are racialized as they are politicized.

Methods
I collected tweets and memes related to the #LivingWhileBlack trend from July 4, 2018 through March 6, 2019. Though the initial incident with BBQ Becky (Jennifer Schulte) occurred on April 29, 2018, new memes were still being created about the incident at the time I began collecting data. New memes as well as memes that were retroactively collected are included in the BBQ Becky corpus (n=15,321). Data from 14 additional distinct racialized incidents (n=38,487) were also collected beginning on July 4, 2018. In total, 89,059 tweets were collected but this analysis focuses solely on the BBQ Becky corpus. After the period of initial data collection on Twitter, I engaged in participant observation of the circulation of Becky, and later, Karen memes, for an additional period of 15 months. For an exact breakdown of tweet volume by occurrence, see Table 1. I frame the tweets being analyzed as part of the digital public sphere in which information is exchanged for purposes of dialogue. I proceed in the tradition established by scholars who treat Twitter as a space for ethnographic observation and individual memes as texts for close reading (see Brock, 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Murthy, 2008). I argue that this subset of tweets represents a unique counter-public in that a majority of its users are not part of dominant, mainstream internet culture.

In conjunction with my ethnographic reading of tweets, I perform a CTDA of BBQ Becky memes (Brock, 2018). CTDA is a multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture. It integrates an analysis of the technological artifact and user discourse, framed by cultural theory to unpack semiotic and material connections between form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Brock, 2018 p. 1).

CTDA necessitates the use of critical theory to explore underrepresented users. Technologies request, demand, encourage, discourage, refuse, and allow particular forms of social action (Davis, 2020; Davis & Chouinard, 2016). In the CTDA tradition, I consider the affordances and limitations of Twitter for hosting this discourse.

I commissioned the collection of tweets from AK5A. They created a program, Python Twitter Hashtag Collector, that communicates with Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) every 12 hr via python (using the “tweepy” library https://www.tweepy.org/). The program also collects media (photos and videos), metadata (dates tweets were created, the original tweet, and any replies to tweets), and the raw JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) from the API. Data were then formatted in SQLite and placed in two different databases for each hashtag collected. One database included raw API responses and the other contained formatted response data (the latter more easily queried). The SQLite databases were then able to be queried and exported to excel for further analysis. The BBQ Becky SQLite database was queried using the terms “Police/Policing/Cop(s),” “White,” and “Racist/Racism.” An overview of volume of tweets per query is provided in Table 2.

CTDA is not designed to derive representative, generalizable notions based on data. CTDA focuses on understanding discourse as a whole. I have provided an overview of tweet volume so readers can better understand the context in which memes are situated. Collectively, the query terms “Police/Policing/Cop(s),” “White,” “Racist/Racism” are present in 61% of the tweets circulating using the BBQ Becky Meme or hashtag. My visual CTDA focuses on memes returned from the aforementioned queries of the BBQ Becky corpus as this trend is the earliest case in the meme genre and represented a significant amount of tweet volume. Treating these queries as a combined corpus generated themes that were repeated across the other 14 incidents.

Finally, a note on ethical considerations: to best protect privacy of users, I do not share Twitter handles here or in print without explicit written permission from users. I recognize

### Table 1. Breakdown of Tweet Volume by Occurrence.

| Identifier                  | Total number of tweets |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Living While Black          | 35,572                 |
| Permit Patty                | 15,355                 |
| BBQ Becky                   | 15,321                 |
| ID Adam                     | 8,652                  |
| Pool Patrol Paula           | 5,172                  |
| Bus Berator Brenda          | 2,997                  |
| Pool Patrol Paul            | 2,649                  |
| Jogger Joe                  | 596                    |
| Walmart Mary                | 319                    |
| Road Raging Randy           | 317                    |
| Airline Amy                 | 316                    |
| Candy Bar Cora              | 308                    |
| Lawnmower Lucy              | 297                    |
| Loud Music Maggy            | 296                    |
| Racist Roslyn               | 108                    |
| Burrito Bill                | 76                     |
| Wake Up Suzie               | 35                     |
| **Total**                   | **89,059**             |
that this is not a fail-proof method of ensuring user privacy. Toward this effort, tweets were only scraped from public accounts and individual text from tweets are not included here—visual images and memes are reproduced with author/creator permission if available; otherwise, memes are treated as part of public domain.

**Results and Discussion**

My analysis produced three themes within the larger framing which I outlined above: Beckys and Karens operate on a cultural, White supremacist logic which makes it acceptable to police Black bodies. In turn, Black people on Twitter draw attention to this underlying social force and subvert it by creating memes that call out White supremacist actions and ideologies. BBQ Becky memes circulate a countercultural logic that highlights the ludicrousness of the constant surveillance and criminalization of Black bodies. The following themes emerged across each of the three main topic clusters (race, White, and police): (1) Everyday Policing of Blackness/Disciplining of the Docile Body; (2) Historical Connections to White Supremacy and White Surveillance; and (3) White Tears Weaponized.

**Theme 1: Everyday Policing of Blackness/Disciplining of the Docile Body**

This theme centers on the everyday policing of Blackness. BBQ Becky memes suggest that policing of Blackness is routine, commonplace, and mundane, highlighting the fact that this policing is a feature of Whiteness. Moreover, they call attention to an underlying issue: that disgruntled White individuals are upset specifically because Black people are free, happy, and minding their own business as demonstrated by the piece of the pie meme (Image 1) and BBQ Becky calling the police (Image 2).

The memes also emphasize the power of White surveillance and the dominant cultural logic that positions White people as the pinnacle of privilege and power in the United States—they have so much power, they can even police the only Black president the United States has ever had (Image 3).

Seemingly light and humorous, the BBQ Becky memes does serious ideological work. The threat of imminent violence is a consistent thread throughout each racialized incident with Becky, Karen, and the like. The step between calling in violence, to be perpetrated by police, and actually committing violent acts is a small one if the end result is the same. Amy Cooper (Central Park Karen), Jennifer Schulte (BBQ Becky), and Alison Ettel (Permit Patty) were all violent in the same way: they threaten to enact violence against Black people with relative impunity through surveillance and policing. If the police were to respond to such a call, given the current state of racist policing in the United States, it is quite possible that these incidents could result in the death of another Black person (Williams, 2020).

Although Foucault’s work is not without critique, his docile bodies framework is germane to a discussion on White women and the threat of imminent violence: “Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, 2012, Table 2. Volume of Tweets Per Query.

| Identifier         | Total number of tweets | Search query “police/policing/Cop(s)” | Search query “white” | Search query “racist/racism” |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Living While Black | 35,572                 | 33.84% (n = 12,037)                    | 40.64% (n = 14,458)  | 5.94% (n = 2,115)             |
| Permit Patty       | 15,355                 | 14.96% (n = 2,298)                    | 8.85% (n = 1,360)    | 11.78% (n = 1,809)            |
| BBQ Becky          | 15,321                 | 43.69% (n = 6,694)                    | 8.00% (n = 1,226)    | 9.33% (n = 1,430)             |

![Image 1. “They” Finally Got a Piece of the Pie.](image1.png)

![Image 2. BBQ Becky is not Invited to the Cookout.](image2.png)

![Image 3. BBQ Becky – White House Lurker!](image3.png)
In the past, Black voices relied on traditional Black media such as Black owned newspapers and Black television stations to circulate news and media about racial injustice. A White person who wanted to become aware of these issues needed to seek out resources (except for rare instances when “Black news” crossed over to mainstream media flows). Twitter removes this barrier, affording Black voices time and space on a mainstream digital media platform. When #LivingWhileBlack trends, it does not only trend for Black users. Twitter also affords a network of action when meme production is considered as social action (Chen, 2012; Milner, 2013b). Many scholars have similarly observed Black digital collectives exercising agency through Twitter (see Brock, 2012; Dickerson, 2016; Miller et al., 2020; Williams & Gonlin, 2017). Twitter allows multiple actors to offer commentary on the same types of racist, White supremacist behavior; forming a social collective that draws attention to the threat of imminent violence, helping to subvert the White disciplinary gaze in the process.

**Theme 2: Historical Connections to White Supremacy and White Surveillance**

In this theme, BBQ Becky is positioned as a stand in for the ever-present watchful eye of White surveillance. Black meme creators point to the long-standing, panoptic disciplinary presence of Whiteness. After all, the advent of modern policing in the United States is a direct result of White supremacist desire to surveil, patrol, and regulate Black bodies in the 1800s (Byfield, 2019; Platt, 1982; Potter, 2013). In early renditions of what would become police systems in the US South, White individuals were selected from communities to (1) find and return slaves to their masters, (2) provide a system of fear and terror that would discourage slave revolts, and (3) offer extralegal disciplinary services for those who violated plantation rules (Potter, 2013):

Following the Civil War, these vigilante-style organizations evolved into modern Southern police departments primarily as a means of controlling freed slaves who were now laborers working in an agricultural caste system, and enforcing “Jim Crow” segregation laws, designed to deny freed slaves equal rights and access to the political system (p. 3).

I argue that Becks and Karens act as an extension of this vigilante-style arm of policing and regulation of White supremacist order. Through seemingly casual interactions with Black individuals in public spaces, White actors ensure that Black bodies are not out of place and that they conform to White supremacist expectations of law and order. Hence, Theme 2 draws connections from the current policing of Blackness and connects BBQ Becky with historical policing and surveillance of Black bodies by positioning her in the context of significant historical and political moments. For example, BBQ Becky can be seen calling the police on Martin Luther King during the March on Washington (Image 4) and during a Civil Rights era sit in (Image 5). Black people have a shared cultural knowledge about federal surveillance of Dr. King which arguably facilitated his early demise. This set of memes offers commentary on the ideological damage of White supremacist action. In addition, the coloring of BBQ Becky here, in black and white, explicitly positions her as a stand in for historical White surveillance—suggesting that this surveillance is the same yesterday and today.
Theme 2 also critiques White people as the supposed arbiters of free speech and peaceful protest. BBQ Becky is depicted calling the police on Colin Kaepernick (Image 6) for engaging in peaceful protest by taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem. Users generate an interconnected dialogue on everyday policing of Blackness and violent policing at the hands of the state which Kaepernick was protesting. Similarly, BBQ Becky is positioned behind Rosa Parks, calling the police on her for refusing to leave her seat (Image 7). This set of memes puts BBQ Becky in direct conversation with the ongoing discourse on free speech and suggests that White people believe they have the power to control when and how free speech and civil disobedience are expressed and invoked. I return to Whiteness-informed civility (Rudick and Golsan (2018) as much of the popular culture debate surrounding NFL protests positions taking a knee during the playing of the National Anthem as “unAmerican.” This framing of civility relies on White supremacist constructions of civility. Black men are deemed uncivil when they do not conform to American norms about “respecting the flag.” Yet, both depicted forms of protest (Kaepernick and Parks) position Black actors as unbothered by BBQ Becky’s presence as bodies are facing away from her—again defying her surveilling disciplinary gaze.

Theme 3: White Tears Weaponized

This theme deals with ongoing discourse on White tears—specifically White women’s tears—and how they are used to strategically combat racial discomfort. Racial discomfort is defined as uneasiness or distress when faced with discussions about race (DiAngelo, 2018). Racial discomfort also occurs when White individuals are forced to confront their own White guilt. Under the ruse of racial ignorance, White people strive to maintain the idea that race is without meaning in contemporary society. Returning to Mueller’s (2019) *Theory of Racial Ignorance*, White people actively “resist racial knowing to construct a distorted reality so they can perform, abide by, and enjoy the spoils of racism without being racist” (p. 158). This performance of ignorance is
effortful. When forced to reconcile with the truth about race and their complicity in upholding racism, White women respond with a range of defensive behaviors including argumentation, crying, silence, and running away (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57). Where DiAngelo frames White fragility as a result of privileges associated with being White such as insulation from discussions about race, I frame White fragility as a performance that coincides with effortful ignorance (Mueller, 2019) about race. White fragility is the fear of losing social control. Hence, Theme 3 highlights memes that position BBQ Becky as fearful of Blackness in itself. In a series of images (Images 8 and 9), BBQ Becky is positioned as crying because she is afraid of Blackness.

“Whiteness is constructed differently for White men and White women, though race is the marking mechanism through which the privilege of each is maintained” (Spanierman et al., 2012, p. 174). While White men are more concerned with losing their privilege, White women are concerned with feelings of guilt associated with Whiteness (Spanierman et al., 2012). Spanierman and colleagues argue that emotional demonstrations, such as crying, are a result of White guilt. But the actions of Beckys and Karens demonstrate that White women also fear losing social dominance. Their actions establish a commitment to maintaining the existing White supremacist social order. I argue that White women’s tears are an effortful manipulation, designed to garner sympathy from others to evade responsibility for racism. Users’ positioning of BBQ Becky memes supports this framing. BBQ Becky memes poke fun at, and highlight, the fear of losing the existing White supremacist order. Image 9, a meme that depicts BBQ Becky running away from Megan Markle, touches on an ongoing discourse in popular culture: that Megan Markle asserted Blackness into the royal family (and that the royals are not happy about this new arrangement). BBQ Becky is running from shifting racial dynamics as well as the loss of social power that this change brings.

Memes that critique dominant cultural logics and ideologies have been well documented by communications scholars and sociologists (see Castaño Díaz, 2013; Chen, 2012; Davis et al., 2016; Ekdale & Tully, 2014; Gal et al., 2016; Huntington, 2013; Katz & Shifman, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Chen (2012) frames 4chan as a contested site of cultural production directly relying on underlying cultural and ideological negotiation. Others note memes can undergird political processes by acting as a stand in for traditional news media coverage and helping to disperse political perspectives across the internet (Aitwani, 2017; Börzsei, 2013). The results of this study contribute to this growing body of work. BBQ Becky memes comment on political discontent, highlight racial inequality, and subvert White supremacist narratives. As other scholars have documented, the intertextuality of memes allow them to communicate political and racial injustice across national borders (Mina, 2012). Likewise, BBQ Becky and Karen memes have become part of an international dialogue on White entitlement (see Hunt, 2020; Williams, 2020).

In the United States, racialized political memes have seen a resurgence with the recent BLM protests. Nathan Rambukanna (2015) explores emergent racialized memes within activist spaces surrounding Ferguson protests. He argues that memes operate along with hashtag activism to extend the discursive context of Ferguson protests:

While the social media articulation of #Ferguson did not “cause” this struggle to become global news, it is a significant part of its global articulation. Like how the portable videocamera became a crucial part of the event that was the Rodney King police beatings and their fraught aftermath, the political use of hashtags helped to ignite a global reflection on race, the policing of Black bodies and the militarisation of police, and became a crucial part of this new assemblage (Rambukanna, 2015, p. 175).

Similarly, the BBQ Becky and Karen memes do not initiate new legislation protecting Black individuals from casual White supremacy but they do help circulate discourse about the need for such legislation. Discourse created by those circulating Black protest memes certainly fills gaps in the mainstream, normative digital public that further a conversation on the injustices associated with living while Black.
Conclusion: Black Memes Matter

Within the last decade, the scholarly community has come to recognize the role of digital media in contemporary social movements (Harlow, 2012; Ince et al., 2017; Mundt et al., 2018; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014; Zeitzoff, 2017). BLM is likely the most prominent and salient example of a social movement that has harnessed collective energy across platforms to engender social action both online and offline but is not the only one to do so. Movements in various countries have been linked to Twitter and Facebook (Bozkuş, 2016; Chaudhry, 2014). Memes play an important role in social movements and identity movements in that they transmit culturally coded information about language, social critique, and ideology. This research contributes to our scholarly understanding of Black memes by highlighting how racialized memes do race work and offer commentary on US race relations. As I have argued in this article, the BBQ Becky meme genre (Karen memes included) provides several interrelated social functions that buttress the aims of movements like BLM. Primarily, BBQ Becky and Karen memes call attention to, and reject, White women’s surveillance and regulation of Black bodies in public spaces—making an important connection between racialized surveillance of the past and contemporary acts of “casual” racism. These memes also disrupt White supremacist logics and performative racial ignorance by framing Karens and Beckys as racist—not just disgruntled or entitled. Finally, these memes engender discussions of legal and social consequences (job loss for example) for White individuals who harass Black people. Secondly, Karen and Becky memes have initiated an international conversation on the state of race relations and Whiteness throughout the globe (see Heffernan, 2020; Hunt, 2020; Nagesh, 2020). These memes have given the world an easily recognizable visual shorthand that conveys a particular type of White racial ignorance and White entitlement.

One area that is up for debate surrounding the use of Black memes in social movements is the element of humor. Opponents of names like Becky and Karen argue that they are “too cutesy” (Farzan, 2018) and distract from the central issue: White supremacist violence against Black people. My reading of Black memes positions humor as a tactic for engaging in difficult dialogues about race and racism. Other scholars have taken similar approaches. Mina (2014) offers that humor is a palatable vehicle for social critique and resistance. Tay (2014) coined the term “LOLitics” to describe the “combination of internet memes and political humor.” She demonstrates that memes emerge at the “intersection between pleasure-driven ‘play’ and [...] genuine political discourse” (Tay, 2014, p. 46). Memes encourage people to “play with the news,” allowing news media consumers to digest the news while creating new meaning along the way (Tay, 2014, p. 48). Black scholars have long held the understanding that at times we laugh through the pain as a protective function when discussing deeply traumatic topics such as the continued violence from White supremacist systems (see Brock, 2012; Williams & Gonlin, 2017).

Silliness of naming protocols aside, Becky and Karen memes provide a vital social function, one that sociologists and media scholars should note—they restore agency to Black communities by allowing them to exert a form of justice on perpetrators. In a subversion and reversal of power dynamics, Black meme creators police White supremacy and explicitly call for consequences. Many White supremacist Karens and Beckys have lost their jobs as a result of the widespread circulation of Black memes. In addition, Representative Janell Bynum of Oregon suggested that the memes act as a stand in for traditional news coverage on such issues and encouraged her to create legislation that ensures penalties for calling the police on individuals for living while Black. In recent news, these events have become more explicitly violent and more frequent, causing several additional states to work toward protective laws for Black people, including California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Washington. These proposed laws include forms of hate-crime enhancement charges that would be added to existing charges for “fabricating a criminal report if bias is involved” (Sacchetti et al., 2020).

The women portrayed in the BBQ Becky and Karen memes are emblematic of the social dominance that White people have the ability to invoke at their leisure. The threat of imminent violence posed by Becky and Karen trains Black people to fear White violence. However, these acts (calling the police for perceived infractions of the law or disruptions of White comfort), though intended to assert social dominance, have resulted in a more visual and visible conversation about Black oppression. BBQ Becky and Karen memes do the work of calling for accountability and are responsible for spreading pictures of offenders throughout society. Karens and Beckys are no longer allowed to hide behind their words. If the incident is caught on camera, memes assure that perpetrators are known, held accountable, and socially sanctioned—again extending agency of Black Twitter users. Resulting memes provide fodder for trans-platform conversations about the lived experience of oppression—generating the hashtags: #livingwhileBlack #workingwhileBlack, and a slew of others referencing distinct and recent racialized incidents in which Black citizens were casually criminalized while engaging in lawful leisurely activities. In turn, these conversations have increased discourse, adding fuel to the BLM movement (Carney, 2016; Lee, 2018; Mohdin, 2018; Richardson, 2020). These memes demonstrate the explicit creation of counternarratives by circulating imagery that subverts intended White supremacist ideology and rejects positioning as Black docile bodies, suggesting that Black memes matter in the struggle against racial injustice.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the anonymous reviewers for their time and effort toward bettering this work. This gratitude also extends to Drs
Becky. (2016).

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1. There are several popular culture critiques of using the names “Karen” and “Becky” to refer to a type of White entitlement and/ or racism. Further research is needed to explore these critiques. Others may have interest in interpretations of linguistic naming conventions or their origins. If you have interest, I invite you to write that paper.

2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=dKIYK7M7XMo

3. I use Laura Ahearn’s (2001) provisional definition of agency, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112), throughout the article but offer a more situated explanation of agency in the “Results and Discussion” section.

4. I interviewed Representative Janell Bynum of Oregon on January 13, 2020, about her recent success in passing legislation that penalizes 911 calls that target individuals for living while Black.

Notes

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