From Permit Patty to Karen
Black Online Humor as Play and Resistance
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Traditionally, Black communities have used humor to talk back to those in power while avoiding what the author calls "the dominant gaze." She argues that Black humor acts as a resistance, especially when considered through the lens of play. Drawing from cultural play literature, critical race studies, and the literature about Black humor, she considers two related case studies based on the hashtags #PermitPatty and #Karen to explore the response of Black people to white femininity. The first case concerns the circulation of the phrase "Permit Patty" in response to a white woman who called the police against a young Black girl for selling water on the sidewalk. The second details the use of the name "Karen" online, highlighting how white women align themselves with police to oppress African Americans. The author concludes that Black online users deploy elements of humor, such as the omniscient narrator and inverse stereotyping, to call attention to this reliance of white womanhood on the police state, often at the expense of Black and Brown people, and children in particular. **Key words**: Black humor; culture of dominance; double consciousness; Karen; Permit Patty; resistance

PLAY SCHOLARSHIP INCLUDES the fields of early development, animal studies, public and private imagination, gaming, pleasure, healing, and cultural traditions. To help to narrow the definition of play, Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) outlined its five main traditional elements, those being that play is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral (i.e., imaginative), and active. To move toward a more precise understanding of play, however, it is important that we explicitly reckon with the assumptions about who has the freedom to choose, the time to devote to pleasure, and the resources to be actively engaged. More explicitly, Black bodies are surveilled and catalogued in ways that necessitate a host of creative responses even to exist and, indeed, to play (Browne 2015). Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, for instance, was simply playing with a toy gun in Cleveland, Ohio, when he was gunned down by police after a neighbor reported him and his friends.

A few notable studies have identified and critiqued the Eurocentric assumptions about play as intrinsically motivated, open, and involving pleasure-seeking behaviors (Göncü and Vadeboncoeur 2017). Relying on a sociocultural perspective, which centers culture in human learning, meaning making, and the valence of activities, these play scholars ascertain that we play differently based on a host of historical and cultural factors, including class, race, and geography differences (Edwards 2000; Gaskins 1999; Goodnow 1998; Vygotsky 1978). It is also certainly the case that play functions differently for adults—and Black adults—given the learned linguistic, sociocultural, and political interactions that adults master over time as well as the social inhibitions that guide many adult interactions (Henricks 2020).

Still, the specifics of racialized practices, such as the links between Black humor and play, have yet to be seriously probed in relation to play studies. This article draws from the sociocultural perspective to explore the relationship between play, humor, and resistance by analyzing the digital practices of Black people, and specifically, #PermitPatty and #Karen, both characters created

Figure 1. Popular Internet meme featuring "Karen" and humor as play

online as archetypes of overzealous white women who use their entitlement to the detriment of Black people (see figure 1).

Humor has long informed a kind of play Black and African American communities use to build and maintain community against the ever-present threats of domination (Janus 1981; Levine [1977] 2007). Although scholars suggest that tools such as narrative and collective storytelling offer new roles and possibilities for those engaged in play (Bruner 1986; Fein 1981), a significant gap still exists between traditional play scholarship and thinking about play and Black communities. Indeed, as Black studies scholars contend, storytelling and its many iterations are certainly central to Black humor in ways that can be connected to play. From the activities of other marginalized groups, Southern and Northern Black people, and white people, and from religion, Black publics have crafted intricate narratives to laugh and sometimes, in doing so, to survive.

To connect Black humor and resistance, historian Lawrence Levine uses Sigmund Freud's example of a man being taken to the gallows. In the scenario, referred to by Freud as "the triumph of narcissism," the man has been publicly condemned and led to his execution on a Monday morning. As he is carried, the man comments, "Well, this is a good beginning to the week." Freud argues that humor in this instance rebels against the common and expected mores of a condemned citizen. Moreover, humor in this moment situates the condemned man as the superior adult laughing at the triviality of the children around him, as if to say to onlookers, "This is all life amounts to—child's play." Levine ([1977] 2007) uses Freud's example to think about the ways Black communities have historically used humor to reduce "the outer world . . . to pygmy proportions [to] set aside, or at least to minimize, the pain and defeat imposed upon them by the external world" (343).

It is such use of storytelling in Black humor that I argue Black folks use in online conversations such as #PermitPatty and #Karen to incisively critique white womanhood and the police state while minimizing the pain in specific offline circumstances. Through my two case studies, I argue that Black online publics use humor as play to offer new roles, such as the omniscient narrator, to other Black people and to invert naming stereotypes while critiquing and reducing the forces of domination to that of child's play.

The first case, #PermitPatty, appeared online in June 2018 after a white woman called the police on a young Black girl named Jordan Rodgers for selling water bottles in San Francisco on the sidewalk without a permit. Black users then extended the alliterative name "Permit Patty" to several cases involving white

women who align themselves with the police state to keep African Americans "in their place." PermitPatty also signals the creativity and extensiveness of Black word play in referencing peppermint patty, the candy, and Peppermint Patty, the *Peanuts* character, who seems somewhat aloof in the comic strip. "Karen" also refers to a typical white woman who continues to call the police unnecessarily on Black individuals. Although not for the first time, in May 2020 Black users hilariously deployed use of the name Karen on Twitter after a video circulated of a white woman named Amy Cooper in Central Park who called the police on a Black man named Christian Cooper (not related) for asking her to put her dog on a leash.

These two cases reveal the danger of existing offline for Black individuals. In response, Black folks turn to their digital networks to deploy humor as play both to critique white womanhood's fragility and its alliance with the police state and to recenter themselves through storytelling, imagination, and pleasure. In a recent piece, Apryl Williams (2020) analyzes the functions of memes to critique white womanhood through "BBQBecky" and Karen. She concludes that memes grant Black online publics a form of power and agency over police and white women in the United States. I extend Williams's argument here by connecting Black digital practices specifically to play as an important conduit between humor and resistance. Here, Black humor, resistance, and play respond to an institutional history connecting white womanhood and the U.S. police state.

White Femininity and the U.S. Police State

White femininity is discursively tied to purity, vulnerability, imperialism, modernity, and civilization (Banet-Weiser 1999; Dyer 1997; Shome 2011). As such, white women have historically been positioned in contrast to the uncivil and pathologized "Other." Richard Dyer (1997) famously writes about the social construction of whiteness and demonstrates white feministic ties to purity, particularly in U.S. Christian theology. Writing about the Southern U.S. ideal of womanhood after the American Civil War, Dyer notes, "The white woman as angel was . . . both the symbol of white virtuousness and . . . the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities" (127). Such angelic representations of white women—in art, cinema, poetry, and more—served to situate white women in a position of moral superiority, which "required deference to their needs" (130).

The ideal white woman is further tied to Western imperial discourses. Writing about transnational motherhood, Shome (2011, 2014) argues that white women such as actress Angelina Jolie and British royal Princess Diana represented the ideal modern and global ambassador as they go out primarily into the Global South and save children. These children are then conditioned to grow into modern, Western citizens by white women who act as primary caretakers in the home. As Shome (2011) writes, "To produce modern subjects is to ensure that the home as the basic unity of the nation is civilized, for home is the site for production of the nation's future" (121). White women, then, have been transfixed, particularly in media culture, as the ideal civilized subject and the ultimate signifier for homeliness. The restrictive bind of womanhood as tied to the home (a fragile place that must be protected) is certainly a source of feminist critique (Fraser 1990). However, as scores of Black feminists have shown, the patriarchal binds of homeliness are also a privilege to which Black and Brown women, who historically have had to take care of their families and work outside of the home, have not had access (Carby 1982; Collins 2000; hooks 2015).

White femininity's tie to Western nations is particularly important when we consider Black publics online and their resistance to white women. That is, to challenge a white woman is to challenge an entire nation and, further, its ideologies of modernity, purity, and civilization. Specific to the United States, white women have been protected—legally, violently, and discursively—from "threats" to the nation, such as the supposed sexual prowess of the "Other" (Ware 2015; Wells-Barnett 1895) and policies of criminalization (Daniels, Netherland, and Lyons 2018). As Jesse Daniels writes, "More than individual white women, it is *white womanhood* that does the symbolic work of justifying colonial oppression and racial violence" (8). White femininity's ideological purity has thus been used strategically to advance particular nation-state goals, such as citizenship, modernity, and oppression.

Black men in particular have historically been treated as threats to the nation and, more directly, to white women. Black humor is central here as Black folks narrate their experiences and find a way to laugh anyway. Writing about one of the central sources of laughter, Lawrence Levine ([1977] 2007) states that black laughter "is the desire to place the situation in which we find ourselves into perspective." Jokes about white women, thus, abound in black humor, so as "to exert some degree of control over our environment" (300).

Specific to the police state, white women's constructed vulnerability has continued to advance "law and order" strategically in the United States. For

instance, the criminal justice system protects white, middle-class, heterosexual women while leaving women of color, poor and working class women, and queer or gender nonconforming women vulnerable (Sanbeck 2012). More specifically, white women are protected from the criminalization of drugs and the state's interventions, regardless of their drug use rates and have been sheltered from campaigns to create hysteria against lawbreaking "outsiders" (Daniels, Netherland, and Lyons 2018). Such ties to the police and carceral state are important in understanding the significance of online Black publics' responses to Permit Patty and Karens. These characters are humorously created as hypervigilant, suburban, and nosy white women who rely on the police for protection against Black folks simply minding their own business.

Black Humor as Critique and as Play

I understand Black humor as play by engaging with the elements of both play and humor. Specifically, African American humor acts as play vis-à-vis the use of storytelling and imagination, while navigating (or playing with) the public and private duality of their existence. This public-private duality becomes resistive in nature as Black folks critique dominant culture through humor while protecting themselves. Of course, humor, more broadly, has long been linked to social critique (Dyson 2003; Haggins 2007). For Black publics and comics, as Bambi Haggins writes, laughing mad is "the antithesis of one's jaw being tight . . . [which is] the physical reality of teeth clenched, unable or unwilling to speak, biding your time . . . " (1). As I extend, humor, play, and resistance are wrapped up together and specifically so for Black folks (online) who have had to navigate what it means to deploy each and all of these.

As play scholars have argued, pleasure and imagination certainly look different for nondominant groups who must negotiate dominant narratives of pleasure-seeking behaviors as largely individual and intrinsically motivated (Gaskins 1999; Vygotsky 1978). Specific to Black individuals and groups, the very necessity of private spaces in which to seek pleasure (for example, slave shanties, street corners, and, yes, online networks) speaks to a counter-narrative of play. In his analysis of "hush harbors" as safe places of free expression among African-American speakers, Vorris Nunley (2011) identifies barbershops as rhetorically constructed spaces of knowledge production and circulation. Furthermore, Nunley argues that hush harbor rhetoric becomes resistive precisely because it

does not cater to the sensibilities of white culture. Play functions in spaces, such as the barbershop, as Black folks vacillate between being "philosophers and fools, thoughtful and ignorant, progressive and sexist . . . mostly where they could be everything that being human allows" (2). Here, I extend Nunley's framework of hush harbors to think about the ways that Black online publics similarly play with language, humor, and discourse toward the goals of online resistance.

Other sociocultural perspectives have critiqued dominant assumptions of pleasure and play. Suzanne Gaskins (1999), for instance, reported on Mayan children's play in the Yucatán as highly regulated by older siblings and devoid of the intense affect that has come to characterize Western play. Elements of joy and the intrinsic benefit of play, then, have been found to range in affective possibilities across cultures (Göncü and Vadeboncoeur 2017). Still, Black humor extends the sociocultural perspective by not only demonstrating how play emerges distinctly across cultures but, importantly, the ways in which play is deployed as resistance for Black individuals and groups, particularly so online.

In his seminal work *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock,* Mel Watkins ([1994] 1999) outlines what he calls the "ingredients" of Black humor: Black laughter; an outlandish story or tall tale; a story shaped by a historically minority status and the overcoming of adversities; realism; and, finally, the physical use of the body. I argue that these elements, specifically the story and minoritized status, map onto play as resistance for Black online publics. Black online users, for instance, craft intricate, extravagant stories wherein they are the omniscient narrators who wield the power to place characters wherever they choose. Specific to white femininity and its ties to the police state, Black folks online use play to create characters such as Karen and Permit Patty and fill them with detail, including particular hair and clothing styles, to critique and make visible white femininity more broadly.

As Watkins writes, one of the foundations of African-American humor is narrative. The act of creating a story also allows the storyteller to take control of the characters. As I show through Black digital practices in the cases of Permit Patty and Karen, Black humor online allows a particular kind of control that invites thousands of Black participants to add to pieces of a collective narrative while sharply critiquing white womanhood and the police state. Importantly, a central tool of the narrative is the use of inversion, which makes up the second half of my findings and is worth briefly connecting to resistance, African American linguistics, and play.

In his work, *Laughter,* Henri Bergson ([1911] 2014) details the technique of reversing the roles of characters in a story, which leads to a classic comic scene (a child teaching a parent, for example). The reversal of roles, or incongruity, for Black publics has served as a kind of deviation from institutional structures. As cultural historian Lawrence Levine ([1977] 2007) writes, "The very act of ridiculing individuals, groups, ideas, or institutions easily creates feelings of superiority on the part of the joke-tellers. . . . This type of laughter had been a crucial weapon in the slaves' arsenal, and it remained central in the century following emancipation" (308). Geneva Smitherman (1997) dubs this sort of semantic inversion "flippin' the script" wherein Black communities have "created a communication system that became linguistically unintelligible to the oppressor, even though it was his language" (17). This relationship of Black inversion—flippin' of the script—to empowerment is also captured in Henry Louis Gates' concept of "signifyin'" (or Black discursive word play), which other digital media scholars have discussed at length (Florini 2014). Marcyliena Morgan (1996) critiques the male-dominated lens of Black vernacular in her work on "conversational signifyin'," which highlights the ways that Black women and girls demonstrate powerful linguistic dexterity through children's play, adolescent verbal activities, and adult interactions. I draw on Morgan's work to posit that humor and play function as a bridge between Black linguistic dexterity—such as inversion, flippin' the script, and signifyin'—and efforts of online resistance.

Thus, both storytelling and inversion as ingredients of Black humor map well onto the elements of play (intrinsically motivated; freely chosen; pleasurable; nonliteral [imaginative]; and actively engaged), but they also extend current understandings of play because Black humor is both imaginative *and* necessarily peppered with realism, and, often, resistance. Specifically, Black humor is made up of the unique experiences of Black individuals who often navigate a minoritized status.

Regarding play, as mentioned, the relationship that African American publics have had to navigate between public and private spaces often leads to the creation of imaginative other worlds that shift the protagonist of the players' (marginalized folks') stories. Drawing from W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness," Watkins ([1994] 1997) writes of the use of humor that allows the storyteller to stitch together the tightrope Black folks have had to walk between their public engagements and their private selves: "Behavioral adjustments forced many African Americans to assume dual social roles: one for a hostile white world, the

other the natural demeanor they reserved for interactions among themselves. Humor was a crucial factor in dealing with the situation. In interactions with whites, it eased tensions that might otherwise have exploded into violence. . . . In the privacy of completely black settings, black humor was more acerbic. . . . For much of America's past, the two faces of black humor could not be combined without serious risk" (35).

Play scholarship details the importance of the public and the private vis-à-vis imagination. Huizinga's ([1955] 2016) famous "magic circle," for instance, analyzed the process of play whereby insiders are privy to a whole new world to which outsiders (nonplayers) do not have access. Further, this sort of imagination is an individual as well as collective process in which "players act out roles in publicly acknowledged stories as well as their own fantasies. In so doing, they learn what it means to be part of the human community" (Henricks 2020, 133).

Beyond simply an insider versus outsider or player versus nonplayer relationship, play for Black publics involves complex social tensions that require creativity, prowess, and linguistic dexterity to circumvent. For example, the public-facing functions of humor and play act differently for Black folks who have had to contend with their humor being used against them. Building on Freud's notion of "naïve humor," where the observer understands the unsophisticated nature of the actor, Watkins writes about an "uneasy pact" that many African American comedians were compelled to enter, knowing that their public-facing humor would typecast them as unsophisticated, lazy, or brash. As Bambi Haggins (2007) writes, "the black comic personae, like the African American condition, were diffused *and often distorted* in mainstream popular consciousness" (3) (emphasis mine). Concurrently, white Americans have consistently perpetuated naïve humor because "accepting the Negro's humanity would have meant acknowledging their own callousness and barbarity" (Watkins [1994] 1999, 30). Although I recognize the crucial distinction between professional comedians and nonprofessionals, I include these analyses because they draw links between language, social experiences, and Black humor's relationship to dominance.

In response to typecasting, some so-called "respectable" Black publics have petitioned to remove what they call "negative" television shows such as *Amos 'n' Andy,* or more recently, reality television shows such as *Basketball Wives,* to eliminate unsophisticated representations of Black people from public consumption (Gates 2018). As scholars like Kristen Warner (2015) remind us, however, the symbolic powers of representation are not enough to counter entrenched

forms of sexism, racism, and classism. As she says about the in-betweenness of Black women's performance on reality television, the focus should remain on the work that such texts do for Black women audiences who indulge the disreputable aspects of themselves within their own communal spaces. Digital scholars like André Brock (2020) explore "ratchetry"—or the digital practice born out of the everyday, sensual, and deviant—as "expressions of joy—as celebrations of self in defiance of norms that can be imposed by both external and internal forces" (131). As Brock argues, Black joy precedes Black resistance, specifically regarding their cultural identities online, a claim with which I agree. The two, however, sometimes collide, as I show here, in the form of Black humor as play. Although outside the scope of this article, the significance of ratchetness is also theorized as a methodological perspective to examine Black and queer identity intersections (Love 2017); the functions of ratchet representations of Black women on reality television (Lewis 2013); and, disrespectability politics (Davis 2018; Pickens 2015; Richardson 2019). What I offer here is the argument that Black online publics eschew the respectable in favor of a humor that is honest, if sometimes rash, and that then even engages in ratchetry to resist white femininity and the police state.

Method: Hashtag Analysis

To understand how Black publics use their online networks to respond to white women and the police state through humor and play, I conducted a textual analysis from a collected sample of one thousand tweets and Instagram posts, which I chose using the keywords "#PermitPatty" and "#Karen," between June and September 2020. As a method, textual analysis offers researchers a set of tools to understand how users make meaning of their broader social realities from the messages that they consume and create (Fiske 1992). This method allowed me to pay attention to the power-laden intersections of race, gender, and the police state as I worked to understand Black publics' use of humor-as-play and resistance through the case studies of #PermitPatty and #Karen. Hashtags also serve as a sort of collective storytelling that index a conversation online (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). However, many users enter into important resistive conversations online without the use of hashtags at all (Maragh-Lloyd 2020a). Thus, using the advanced search functions of both Twitter and Instagram, I also collected posts that used the key words (without hashtags) Permit

Patty, Karen, and Karens. I chose Twitter as the platform of analysis given its material and social allowances that map onto existing Black linguistic and cultural practices, such as call and response and humor as resistance (Brock 2012; Maragh-Lloyd 2020b). Although less studied, Instagram also offers an additional layer of analysis as the platform's image-centered affordances allow levels of creativity and imagination regarding storytelling and resistance for Black publics (Breheny 2017).

A Note on Black Online Publics and Terminology

Digital scholars have extended classical public sphere theories in important ways that influence my analysis. Catherine Knight Steele (2017) brings Catherine Squires's multiple marginal public spheres to the analyses of the digital in showing how African American bloggers create and sustain varying alternate publics outside traditional political spaces. Rachel Kuo (2016) has extended the counterpublics' literature to argue for certain hashtags as important feminist counterpublics. Digital scholars have also examined private spaces and what they have to offer Black users—and Black women in particular (Brock, Kvasny, and Hales 2010). Here, I consider Black publics primarily through Catherine Squires's (2002) framework of what a public does: "[multiple publics' theory] focuses on how different public spheres, composed of members of marginalized groups, *respond to* various political, social, and material constraints" (447) (emphasis mine). My framing of Black online publics through the lens of humor and play offers a way also to understand some of the critiques, such as the lasting impact of digital affordances (public-facing tweets, hashtags) in the discussion of digital publics more broadly.

Lastly, it is important to note that in my findings about Black humor and Black digital practices, there are a host of heterogenous Black users online, each with their own idiosyncratic inflections and personalities. This is important particularly when considering Black online humor as one avenue of resistance to white femininity, underscoring the complexity of Black resistance more broadly (Collins 1990, 2000). As Lawrence Levine ([1977] 2007) writes, "Understanding black humor requires some comprehension of the intragroup tensions and differences existing among [African Americans] in the United States" (339). In other words, Black folks online are not a monolith.

Imagining New Roles: The Omniscient Narrator

Black users fashioned humor as play to craft the character of Permit Patty on Twitter and across the Internet to retell and place themselves at the center of a historically painful relationship between white women and the police state. The online narrative came about after Jordan Rodgers, who was eight years old in June 2018, was selling water bottles outside her mother's home in San Francisco attempting to earn enough money to go to Disneyland (Chokshi 2018). Alison Ettel, a white woman, claimed that Rodgers was selling these water bottles without a permit and called the police. It was then that Rodgers's mother Erin Austin recorded Ettel crouching behind a wall with her cell phone to her ear. After Austin followed Ettel with her camera and declared, "The whole world is going to see you, boo," Ettel's defense for her interference was: "Yeah, [the little girl is] illegally selling water without a permit." Austin posted the video to Twitter with the hashtag #PermitPatty, and the white woman character was born.

Black users online deploy humor as play to create an intricate story in which they are the omniscient narrator, thus repositioning and reducing the authority of the police and white women's claim to protection therein. The omniscient narrator also carries with it traditions of oral storytelling that, absent institutionalized mechanisms with which to preserve their history, Africans and African Americans regularly employ. Lawrence Levine ([1977] 2007), for instance, painstakingly traces African and African American oral traditions, from sermons and songs to folklore, to demonstrate the ways that storytelling and oral traditions both elide dominant publics and allow a sense of control and subjectivity.

These Black oral traditions can serve as a model for play scholars to think about imagination, survival, and resistance. As I mentioned, play requires imagination to create "other worlds" (Huizinga [1955] 2016), a long-standing technique for Black publics, from oral storytelling to Chitlin' Circuit comedy halls (Acham 2004; Haggins 2007; Watkins [1994] 1999). Indeed, the theorization of Afrofuturism—or the imagined technologized, futuristic sights and sounds of Blackness—seem to run parallel to play studies' emphasis of make-believe, replete with imagined roles and characters (Nelson 2002; Womack 2013). That is, both Afrofuturism and play literatures emphasize imagination and experimentation and the possibilities of each, to varying degrees. What Afrofuturism has to offer play studies is also what my analysis aims to provide: the prioritization of Black culture and liberation to show the expansions of imagination and their connections to the experiences of marginalized groups. For example, PermitPatty

Figure 2. Meme shared widely on both Instagram and Twitter that reveals the faults of respectability in the conversation of white womanhood and the police state.
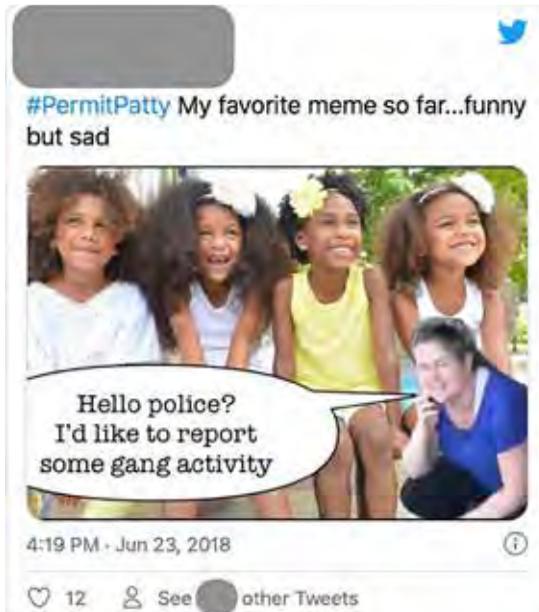

Figure 3. Example of #PermitPatty meme that speaks to the "adultification" of Black children.

and Karen tap into strategies of Black humor such as storytelling and inversion to imagine Black users as the ones in control of the narrative. Thus, as Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack (2013) writes, "[Afrofuturism] is a total revisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques" (9).

Specifically, Black users created other-world scenarios in response to Ettel calling the police on eight-year-old Rodgers by Photoshopping the image of Ettel on the phone from the viral video and transposing it over images featuring well-recognized figureheads, such as Barack Obama (see figure 2).

Several things are going on in these Permit Patty memes that speak to Black humor as resistance. First, the circulating image of former president Barack Obama reminds us that no matter how respectable and high profile a Black person is, white women will often doubt their credentials. Shardé Davis (2018) writes in "The Aftermath of #BlackGirlsRock Vs. #WhiteGirlsRock" that Black women in particular have historically been barred from tenets of respectability (such as attractiveness and professionalism) because "[these standards] are saturated with whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity" (4). In her analysis of Black women's intentional use of disrespectability to respond to the usurping of #BlackGirlsRock, Davis finds that many Black women online discursively subvert an entire power hierarchy in exposing an uncomfortable institutional alliance between Black men and white women. Here, much like the Obama meme, Black users are able to speak to both insiders (about respectability) and outsiders (resisting white femininity) at the same time.

Black users boldly challenge the well-worn tenets of respectability, or the attainment of social and economic capital such as earning a university degree, or even winning the seat of President of the United States. In other words, rather than rely on being respectable to be respected, Black users shift the focus to racism itself, which in this case stems from a national and colonial investment in the legibility and purity of white women.

In addition, children are seen in many of the memes to draw attention to the "adultification" of Black children, specifically Black girls. Specific to play as an act often associated with imagination and innocence, Black children have always had to navigate their claim to such imagination, particularly so in public spaces. Indeed, research shows that Black children, and Black girls in particular, are viewed by adults as "less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers" (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017). These biases transfer both directly and indirectly to Black children in the form of lack of mentorship and institutional support systems in place, because these children are viewed as needing less

support, protection, and nurturing (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017). The adultification of Black children, then, has devastating effects. Through humor and irony (Black children simply smiling in a photo), Black users online are able to call attention to the harm caused by white women while repositioning the racialized innocence of Black children on a mass, reproducible scale. The ideas of respectability and a lack of innocence are brought to the fore through many of the Permit Patty memes as a way to name the harm done by overzealous white women who rely on the police state for protection.

Humor is employed as play here as Black users become the narrators in their own memetic stories. By using digital tools such as Photoshop at their disposal, Black users place Ettel in an array of scenarios to shine light on the ridiculous nature of her claims. This, Watkins ([1994] 1999) writes, is the long recognized "tendency of black wit to focus upon the absurdity inherent in the subjects it treated" (312). The police's power and authority is also shifted because now Black users have the power to humiliate.

Importantly, many of the hashtags and posts that included the phrase Permit Patty also included other white women calling the police unnecessarily, including

Figure 4. #PermitPatty and #BBQBecky combined into one meme that demonstrates the historical patterns of white supremacy.

Figure 5. #PermitPatty and #BBQBecky combined in online posts

BBQ Becky, which referred to a white woman named Jennifer Schulte in Oakland, California, who called the police on a Black family trying to have a barbeque in the park. These connections rescue Permit Patty from an individual instance of racism, which many neoliberal understandings of racism wish to claim (Goldberg 2009). Instead, Black users discursively join BBQ Becky with Permit Patty to call attention to the structural nature of white womanhood and the police state (see figures 4 and 5). One of the functions of memes is their ability to reproduce an image across multiple, recognizable situations (Shifman 2014) (such as Rosa Parks in the bus or the *Step Brothers* [2008] film). We see the insertion of not just one image in a meme but several (Permit Patty and BBQBecky), which again calls attention to white supremacy as a pattern across institutions and time periods (public transportation and public sidewalks) rather than an isolated incident.

Humor is a tool for the marginalized to exert control in otherwise helpless situations (Levine [1977] 2007). I have argued here that humor also functions as play, which allows users to collectively craft a narrative replete with the hapless, overzealous character called Permit Patty. In this story, Black users fashioned themselves as the omniscient narrator, capable of placing characters such as Ettel in outlandish situations. Doing so becomes an act of resistance as Black users expose the dangerous role that white women play by aligning

themselves with the police against the threat of Black folks, including respect-able adults and children.

The hashtags PermitPatty, #BBQBecky, and #Karen also functioned well beyond the specific instance of Ettel in San Francisco or Schulte in Oakland. Iterations of PermitPatty continue to surface, for instance, as Black users play with the original alliteration to highlight continued instances of white women unnecessarily calling the police on Black individuals, such as #CurfewCrusader and #CornerstoneCaroline. These hashtags not only affect public discourse but also policy, as seen with the 2020 passage of the Caren Act (Caution Against Racially Exploitative Non-Emergencies) in San Francisco, which makes it a hate crime to make nonemergency, racially biased 911 calls.

Black humor hashtags, then, certainly evolve beyond their original story lines to make important systemic connections between seemingly isolated incidents. As recently as 2020, users online created video compilations with the name Karen and even Ken to call out white entitlement involved in trying to bypass local and state mandates requiring masks during the coronavirus pandemic (see figure 6). Ultimately, stories such as Permit Patty reveal the lasting lifespan of Black-humor-as-play and Black users' ability to critically connect white feminin-ity to the institutions of nationhood, health, and policing.
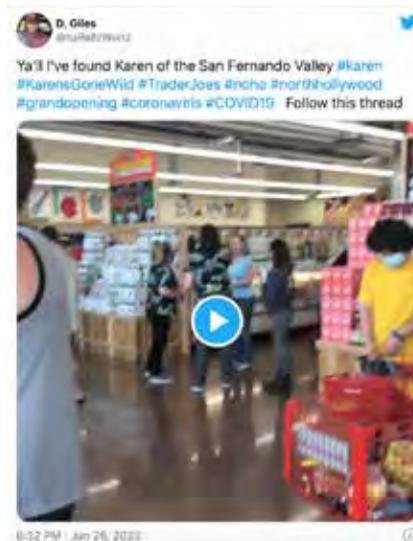

Figure 6. Karen extended online to reveal antimaskers making systemic connections of white entitlement

What's in a Name? Creating Inverse Stereotypes

As historians and cultural writers have explored, inversion or incongruity is central to the makings of a comic scene and also to African American linguistics (Bergson [1911] 2014; Levine [1977] 2007; Smitherman 1997). That is why we laugh at *Saturday Night Live*'s Michael Che's 2018 performance detailing his experience in an elevator with a white woman (which happened "not on purpose"), when she "grabs her purse real tight" . . . (and the punchline) . . . "I got scared." The inversion here is that Che, a Black man, is the terrified one in a situation that often paints white women—because of their connection to vulnerability and civilization—as fragile and threatened, particularly by Black men.

The Karen posts online functioned as humor precisely because of this classic inversion technique. That is, Black people, and Black women in particular, have long had to contend with stereotypes of their names, from schooling to professional settings (Kohli and Solórzano 2012; Watson, Appiah, and Thornton 2011). Indeed, the untraditional (by white standards) nature of many Black names stems from the lack of control that Black families have had over their names for centuries (enslaved Africans had to take the last names of their masters and the first names of whatever their masters willed, for instance) (Thorton 1993). Thus, first names have become important for many Black folks who are crafting a new generation of familial heritage because original last names have been stolen. Still, the jokes and stereotypes of Black names abound. For instance, Kristal Brent Zook (1999) details the stereotypes around the character Shenenah Jenkins, who is almost always seen with exaggerated buttocks, large earrings, and colored hair extensions in the popular 1990s sitcom *Martin.* Jenkins is played by Martin Lawrence and, as Zook argues, perpetuates the neck rolling, extravagant, and fat stereotypes of Black women (with stereotypical names like Shenenah). Regarding representation, Stuart Hall (1993) famously argues in "What Is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" that, though representations (like the Shenenah character) have lasting effects politically, socially, and economically, the struggle over cultural hegemony is never a zero-sum game. Instead, he says, "it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture" (107). Thus, details that make up the Shenenah character are important in thinking not only about the effects of a name but also the importance of Black users' reversal of stereotypes and the creation of Karen.

The archetype of Karen as a middle-aged, middle-class white woman has existed in Internet culture for quite some time. Sporadically, Karens and Kar-

ening surfaced online in response to white women who blatantly showed them-
selves to be above mandatory public rules like mask wearing or leashing pets
(Harris and Haasch 2020). In April 2020, a white-presenting woman on Twitter
posted a message that seemed to resonate with quite a few other users: "Does
anyone else think the 'Karen' slur is *woman hating* and based on *class prejudice*?"
(emphasis mine). Hundreds of users responded in agreement, many of whom
added that "race might play a role as well." This instance demonstrates the prob-
lematic of white femininity, which is not only about isolated incidents of white
women behaving badly but more importantly about the culture of dominance
that continually refuses to critique the consequences of its actions.

Whereas hashtags are well known to allow for a unique kind of digital
collective storytelling (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Brock 2012), the name Karen on
its own was enough for Black users to demonstrate the power of Black humor
to craft an outlandish story that is shaped by a minoritized status and a will to
overcome. Thousands of Black users responded to the claim that Karen could
be a slur again by presenting the situation with the absurdity that it deserved
(see figures 7, 8, and 9).

There are several layers of incongruities leading to Black humor as play
and resistance in the Karen posts. First, the explicit use of the name Karen, as
mentioned, serves to invert the stereotypical names (and by extension, the cari-
catures and tropes) of Black women with that of "pure" white women. Second,
users add their own creative take to the story by inverting actual slurs that have
led to insurmountable violence against Black people (e.g., the n-word). Doing
so, hilariously points out the obvious: Until white women can show the histori-
cal damage done to them through use of the name Karen, their claims here are

Figure 7. Example of Karen being used as an inverse in Black humor as play.

Figure 8. Example of Karen as Black humor showcasing creativity from Black users' experiences.

Figure 9. "Karen" inverted to be imagined as a racial slur.

baseless. Third, as Permit Patty showed, Black users took control of the narrative of white women being able to call the police so easily by deploying the reverse racism frame (see figure 7). In this imagined scenario, Black folks are now the dominant group complaining about discrimination. Part of what connects such Black humor to resistance, I am arguing, is play itself. That is, central to play is the imagination to create other worlds, or a magic circle, in which only the players are privy to the content involved. So, Black humor becomes resistance online as Black digital publics call each other into being from their own experiences to weave the inverted story of Karen.

Lastly, and perhaps most interestingly, some Black folks invert use of the resignified term, "nigga," which reclaims and subverts a damaging and violent history (Asim 2007), by making Karen the new resignifed term, as shown in the example of "K*rens in Paris" (figure 8). Such incongruity tells the centuries-long saga of a now-inverted story: *white women* as the victims of racial violence and the subsequent creators of genres of music, such as blues and hip-hop. The very fact that this story is inconceivable given white women's status as pure and protected (Shome 2011, 2014), is the joke's punchline. Bambi Haggins (2007) sums up the importance of humor in cases like this one by stating that humor is effective in Black comedy when it is "able to elicit thought along with the laughter" (7).

The Karen examples serve as play in each of their creative inversions. That is, Black users create imagined other worlds using their own experiences to form a magic circle in which only those who know the pains of discrimination and stereotyping at the hands of white supremacy (at least) may join.

Conclusion

Play studies has thus far made significant inroads across important fields, such as child development and therapy studies. I have argued that Black offline and online practices have long mapped onto elements of play, such as storytelling and imagining other worlds. Specifically, through an analysis of the case studies Permit Patty and Karen, I have shown how Black users incisively critique the historical alliance between white womanhood and the police state vis-à-vis black humor as play. Specifically, Black folks online act as omniscient narrators in their creation of scenarios involving Permit Patty, which shifts the power and authority from white women to the users themselves. Using the digital tools of

Photoshop and memes and the public-facing, highly spreadable affordances of social network sites, Black users create other worlds to expose the relationship between white women and the police. While others might critique the short lifespan of hashtags, I would argue that using the framework of Black humor demonstrates the impact of resistance regardless of and in tandem with digital affordances. This sort of fruitful and complicated relationship between Black folks and technology is certainly ripe ground for analysis moving forward.

In tandem, Karen was deployed as an inversion of existing stereotypical names of which Black folks are well aware. As I explored, this kind of inversion or incongruity is one of the central tenets of humor. Ultimately, Permit Patty and Karen rely on Black humor as play to call attention to the reliance of white womanhood in the maintenance of purity and civilization, often at the expense of Black and Brown people. All users add to the narrative with their own experiences and layers of resistance in a collective storytelling of joy, humor, and resistance.

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