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Memes on Trial: From Permit Patty to Karen

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Abstract

This paper articulates a theory of Black complaint by engaging feminist theories of complaint and Black critical theories of visuality. It focuses on the late 2010s viral video trend of alliteratively nicknamed White women (e.g., "Permit Patty," "Cornerstore Caroline") calling the police on Black people and the later Karen meme. Connecting these memes to Simone Browne's (2015) concept of dark sousveillance, the paper shows that, rather than simply rendering Black people out of sight of the White gaze, the Karen and Permit Patty memes instead place Whiteness and White supremacy on trial by creating a visual archive that legitimizes the testimony of Black individuals living in a climate of anti-Blackness. This paper argues that these memes, viral videos, and the Black online counterpublics that circulate these images comprise an important register for Black grief and activism and suggest an alternative form for demanding redress for Black injury outside the American criminal justice system.

Keywords

memes, visuality, feminism, anti-Blackness, surveillance, complaint, activism

Introduction

"You can hide all you want, the whole world gonna see you, boo." This line, spoken from behind the cellphone camera by the woman filming, is the main intervention of the 2018 viral video of Alison Ettel, soon to be better known as "Permit Patty," calling the police on a young Black girl selling water on the sidewalk. In the video, Ettel claims that the girl was selling water without a permit,

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which prompted her call. As Ettel is on the phone with the police, she ducks behind a wall to avoid being captured on video.

"Permit Patty" is one instantiation of what I am calling the alliterative name meme. The videos within this meme have multiple points of origin: some are filmed by the individual being harassed, some by family members of the victim, and some by bystanders who may be Black or non-Black. What links these videos are the memetic, alliterative hashtag names the videos received as they circulated on Black online satellite counterpublics: BBQ Becky, Permit Patty, Cornerstore Caroline, and so on. These alliterative names came to be associated with these videos, and with the women featured in them, through their origin and initial circulation within what André Brock Jr. (2020) calls online Black satellite counterpublics such as Black Twitter—independent, but not private, online publics that occupy space on mainstream social media platforms. Brock describes Black Twitter as "an online gathering…of Twitter users who identify as Black and employ Twitter features to perform Black discourses, share Black cultural commonplaces, and build social affinities" (81). Videos such as the one of Ettel circulated on online satellite counterpublics are an example of a Black cultural commonplace: the shared experience of being surveilled and policed in public by White people, and in particular by White women. These alliterative names are significant in that they mark these videos as part of a genre, forming a visual archive of encounters with anti-Black surveillance. Another notable feature of the alliterative name meme is that its focus is not on explicit representations of Black injury or trauma. In contrast to other familiar forms of representing anti-Black violence such as bodycam videos of police brutality, in many instances of the meme the Black victim is not onscreen because they are the one behind the camera.

The issue of visuality, and of which bodies form the subject of these memes and which are the objects, evokes Simone Browne's (2015) formulation of dark sousveillance. Browne refers to dark sousveillance as tactics used by Black people to render ourselves "out of sight" of the "totalizing surveillance of the White gaze" (21). Browne connects dark sousveillance to the practices through which Black people resisted slavery and warned each other of police and White citizens acting as police after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (1-4). While the videos and images that make up the alliterative name meme operate within the legacy of dark sousveillance, I argue that the function of these memes is just as much, if not more, about mobilizing surveillance technologies to turn the gaze back on Whiteness and White supremacy as it is on rendering Black individuals invisible or illegible to these technologies. This combination of rendering out of sight and making visible is demonstrated in the Permit Patty video, where the woman behind the camera is never seen, and both she and the child selling water bottles go unnamed in contemporary media reports about the video while Ettel's name and face were constantly reproduced.[1]

This idea of turning a cumulative gaze back on Whiteness, White supremacy, and the experience of living while Black is what I refer to as the Black complaint—the legacy of critical intervention into the reproduction of anti-Blackness. Like dark sousveillance, the Black complaint mobilizes traditional technologies of surveillance. These include not only the cellphone camera but also the social media sites these videos are uploaded to, the television news channels that take up and add to the virality of these images, as well as the social mechanisms of public shaming and the legal apparatus that respond to and evaluate claims to injury and determine the means of redress.

This paper begins with the trial, exploring how the narrative framework of the iconic American criminal trial shapes the form and reception of the alliterative name and Karen memes. In this context, the trial is a narrative form within the Western regime of visuality, and the concept of "rendering" as the technological production of both visual images and different modes of being. This paper then examines limitations of the trial to register Black injury by describing the transformation of the alliterative name meme into the Karen meme. The second half of the paper theorizes Black complaint, drawing from the anti-lynching work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett to explore complaint's non-reproductive labor and ways in which White hegemonic discourse try to stop the articulation of Black complaint. Finally, this paper explores how virality and remixing function as a method of stopping Black complaint online through an analysis of 2009 viral "Bed Intruder Song" and speculates on the potential of apparently failed complaints to provide phenomenologies of White supremacy and anti-Blackness.

The Trial and the Regime of the Visual

While the alliterative name and Karen memes often have sonic components, my analysis of these memes focuses on their visuality. The visual is the privileged sense and site of knowledge in Western culture. I use the term *visuality* not just as a descriptor of all visual images, but as a practice of the visualization of history: "the making of the processes of history perceptible to authority" (Mirzoeff 2011, 474–75). In this essay, I argue that visuality is a process of rendering, a concept that Nicole Fleetwood describes both as the technological production of visual representations and the making or becoming of certain kinds of subjectivity (2011, 7). As part of the project of visuality, the Black body has been rendered an object of study and representation at the center of the development of Western philosophical, literary, scientific, and technological visual fields since the Enlightenment (Gilman 1985; Morrison 1993; Wynter 1995). Within this Western visual regime, and particularly within an American national imaginary, Blackness and Black people have been rendered iconic—as ideologically charged representations that accumulate different meanings, values, and norms, and can

be evoked and applied to a variety of situations and events distinct from the context of their creation (Fleetwood 2011). Iconic Blackness is rendered as the limit of humanity, as scandalous, as that which needs to be policed, and as the source of White injury, among many other discourses and signifiers. The contemporary alliterative name and Karen memes are part of a legacy in which new and emergent media technologies define the limits of their forms through the rendering of the Black body. The alliterative name and Karen memes also operate within the logics of another iconic American cultural form: that of the Anglo-American criminal trial.

By referring to the trial as iconic, I am drawing on Carol Clover's (2019) argument that most Americans' understanding of the criminal trial is informed by its media representations. Clover argues that the iconic trial in cinema not only shapes the popular language of law, but that the legal trial itself—a historic spectacle of the American public sphere, made even more accessible first by its broadcast on television and now via online live streaming—influenced the language of American cinematography. Clover's argument that the iconic trial shapes how both the fields of law and film are rendered by the public evokes media studies theories that hold that media technologies are extensions and projections of the human body (Kapp 2018; McLuhan 2001). Within these theories, media technologies are understood not only as extensions or enhancements of human sensorial and perceptive abilities but as technologies that allow for the projection or intervention of the body within its environment, which, in turn, reshapes and delimits humanity's perception of our own capabilities, proportions, and positionalities in our world (McLuhan 2001). Within this understanding of media, the trial is primarily a process of rendering. As other scholars have identified, the trial is a ritualized performance that functions less as a truth-finding inquiry than a competition between sets of dramatic narratives (Friedman 2015; Williams 2002). If truth cannot be considered the trial's primary object, then I argue that the trial's purpose is to render visible claims to and causes of injury, and to set the terms of redress. In other words, the trial represents the process through which encounters between individuals are rendered as matters of public concern—where the wounded body politic is projected over the body of the injured individual.

When I refer to the alliterative name and Karen memes as placing White women and White supremacy "on trial," I am arguing that these memes enact the structures and phases of the iconic trial, albeit within a chronology determined by the immediate and constantly updating flow of the internet rather than the slow grind of the criminal justice system. The iconic trial in American culture—that of a criminal trial before a jury—is structured around the phase of evidence examining. Jurors are asked to deploy a forensic gaze, to look at evidence shown to them in the present and recreate the scene of an alleged past crime (Clover 2019).

Televised and live-streamed trials invite an audience of spectators outside the courtroom to participate in making the history of a crime legible (Williams 2002). The trial asks us to place our faith in the jury's ability to visually affirm the truthfulness of testimony, and in the alleged objectivity of police evidence-gathering procedures and forensic science. The trial does not just require jurors and spectators to use their sense of sight; the logic of the trial is fundamentally visual. It presupposes that by making a claim to injury visible—perceptible to the authority of the jury—the truth, or at least a "truth of exhausted possibilities" of the past event can be discovered and injury can be repaired (Clover 2019, 22-3).

The trial owes its iconicity to its adoption and use of new visual technologies, commitment to the logics of visuality and exposure, and authoritative power to determine subjectivity. When a criminal trial renders a verdict, that verdict renders a person as a criminal or a free person. This process of rendering exceeds the individual bodies present in the courtroom. Every citizen of the United States has the right to a public trial. As a media technology, the trial renders the individual injury being evaluated as an injury to the fabric of society, a crisis that divides the public, a threat to the rule of law. The history and spectacle of "race trials" such as *The People v. O.J. Simpson* and the trial of the four LAPD officers who brutally beat Rodney King demonstrates how we turn to trials of individuals to mediate and redress the injuries of police brutality, domestic violence, the legacy of lynching, and societal anti-Blackness.

Figure 1. Alison Ettel, aka "Permit Patty." Source: Dr. Umar @_ethiopiangold 2018b; Tesema 2018

Within the frame of the iconic trial, memes such as Permit Patty and Karen can be understood as attempts to reclaim the processes of visuality for the Black subject. The provocative statement of the Permit Patty viral video—"You can hide all you want, the whole world gonna see you, boo"—testifies to faith not only in the visual

to represent reality but also in the logics of circulation and exposure. While the jury's gaze holds the authoritative power in the courtroom trial, the Permit Patty video reclaims the power of rendering through the sousveillant gaze of the camera to stage a trial in which the audience is the jury. The woman filming calls attention to how Ettel tries to avoid the camera, implicating this action as an attempt to avoid culpability and redress to the viewer. The obvious verdict of the video is that Ettel is guilty of what she is accused of, and the video's narrator seems to have faith that the internet will show her video to those who will recognize and support this verdict.

The encounter between Ettel and the cameraperson mimics the adversarial form of the trial in which the narratives of the prosecution and the defense compete for the jurors' acceptance (Clover 2019). In the video, Ettel attempts to justify her decision to call the police on the grounds that the child was allegedly selling water without a permit. The lack of permit that inspired Ettel's alliterative hashtag functions as Ettel's claim to injury that she attempts to redress by calling the police to report the supposed misuse of public space. However, the video's narrative and the Black counterpublics online who viewed it argued a different narrative: that Ettel's call to the police was an act of anti-Black surveillance and expressions of White supremacy. In this narrative, it was Ettel's actions that caused injury, not just to the child in question, but to Black people and race relations in the United States as a whole. This injury deserved redress either through the circulation of the video and subsequent damage to her reputation or actual legal charges for making a frivolous call to emergency services.

While Ettel could be viewed as the focus of the video, the larger injury being rendered visible is that of the cumulative White gaze. The cumulative White gaze emerged under the totalizing surveillance of slavery, where White citizens were entrusted with the responsibility to police and respond to Black fugitivity (Browne 2015). In our current era, the cumulative White gaze is realized through the camera lens, the twenty-four-hour news day, and viral internet content as much as through the individual White citizens moving through public spaces. A cumulative gaze implies a process of accumulation: the nature of the gaze lies in the innumerable icons of Blackness as criminal, pathological, and inhuman. This cumulative White gaze is evocative of what Christina Sharpe refers to as the weather—"the atmospheric condition of time and place" where "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" (2016, 106). Ettel's encounter with the unseen girl selling water bottles thereby emerges as a singularity within a totalizing weather of anti-Black surveillance.

I argue that the alliterative name meme can be understood as an attempt to use the trial as a media technology to make perceptible the existence of a Black oppositional gaze or imagination (hooks 1992a, 1992b). These memes tell us

something about the quotidian experience of being Black in public, but they also tell us something about Whiteness. Specifically, the visual archive of alliterative name memes demonstrates that the stereotypes and narratives through which Black people see White people are not the same as the ways in which White people view themselves or wish to be viewed. This is especially true in how these memes represent gender. In the dominant visual field, White women are viewed simultaneously as naturalized visual objects to be consumed and as privileged signifiers of the private within the public/private binary (Osucha 2009). In both registers, the White woman is a passive object whose main role is to provide scopophilia, the voyeuristic pleasure of looking, to men either as a mass-produced commercial object or as private property of her male partner (Mulvey 1999). However, the relationship between the White women in the alliterative name and the Black people who produce and circulate these memes is not scopophilic. To a Black public, these individual women function instead as icons of the historical role of White women as active agents of White supremacy. White women were key catalysts of lynch mobs, both as active agents and as an imagined collective of victims of Black male sexuality. White women were able to use their gendered status as caregivers and nurturers to police the moral and racial hygiene of their communities, a form of patriarchal power still embraced by White women in modern-day White nationalist movements (Darby 2020). The alliterative name memes provide visual evidence to the testimonies of Black people about their specific experience of being surveilled and policed by the White *female* gaze. These accounts of injury are validated as these memes circulate in and beyond Black online counterpublics. These memes bypass the judicial system to rely on public pressure and shaming as its own form of redress. Ettel herself reported that she resigned from her job after her company was confronted with backlash from the Permit Patty video's circulation (Campisi et al. 2018).

However, I want to complicate the idea these memes can be reduced to simply putting individual White women on a kind of "trial by media," not only because this analysis under-analyzes the work of these memes, but also because it ignores the deeper question of whether the trial is a medium that can provide actual repair to the injuries of anti-Blackness. As a case study for why we should be skeptical of the trial as a method for reclaiming the gaze and achieving redress, I will consider the Karen alongside an alternative form for challenging White supremacy and the climate of anti-Blackness: the Black complaint.

The Karen and the Complaint

Figure 2. Amy Cooper, aka "Central Park Karen." Source: C. Cooper 2020

In the past few years, there has been a shift from unique, alliterative names to one name: Karen. Although it is hard to pinpoint when this transition occurred, some have identified coverage of Amy Cooper, a White woman caught on video harassing and calling in a police report against Christian Cooper (no relation), a Black birder in Central Park, as signaling the dawning of the age of Karen (Paskin 2020). The change is not in name only; the content of Karen videos and the connotations of the name have also changed. Karen no longer refers only or primarily to a White woman who calls the police on Black people, but has expanded to include White women who harass service workers, White women who refused to wear masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, or any White woman who display some sort of behavior in public that is seen as inappropriate. Karen is a public nuisance or, to use online terminology current at the time of this writing, "cringe" (Dictionary.com 2018).

This shift has also led to the Karen meme itself being put on trial. If in previous videos it was the White woman who was clearly held to be the cause of injury—standing in for larger systems of White supremacy—for some, the label of "Karen" is in fact injurious. In one commentary published in *The Atlantic*, Helen Lewis (2020) writes, "You can't control a word, or an idea, once it's been released into the wild. Epithets linked to women have a habit of becoming sexist insults; we don't tend to describe men as bossy, ditzy, or nasty…And so Karen has followed the trajectory of dozens of words before it, becoming a cloak for casual sexism as well as a method of criticizing the perceived faux vulnerability of white women." For Lewis, Karen's Whiteness is an excuse, a justification to rebrand familiar

misogynistic stereotypes and insults as anti-racist activism. Thanks to the internet, Black and White men across the globe and the political spectrum are united in their hatred of Karen (Lewis 2020).

Ironically, however, Lewis's article is complicit in a kind of revisionism when she uses the Karen meme as the basis for a feminist analysis that centers White womanhood at the expense of Black female subjectivity. In her analysis of Karen's circulation and reception, Lewis argues that White women and Black men are both victims and accomplices of racism and sexism, and presents White men as their shared oppressor, but doesn't attempt to incorporate Black women into this framework.[2] Lewis's failure to adequately consider Black women's perspectives in her analysis of Karen is disappointing considering the centrality of Black women to the work of complaint and because Black women often captured the videos that make up the alliterative hashtag name meme, including Permit Patty.

However, Lewis is correct that the Karen meme became estranged from its engagement with dark sousveillance and Black complaint once the meme went viral. This estrangement lies in the very expectations placed on a viral video or image. As I described earlier, the alliterative name and Karen memes originated in online Black satellite counterpublics. These online spaces are independent but not hidden from mainstream White online public spaces, and, as a result, narratives, discourses, and images are able to move between these online publics. Studies of online Black practices and counterpublics expose the illusion of a singular public sphere. Furor over "cancel culture" and the anti-Karen backlash do not so much demonstrate the supposed free market of ideas as they exemplify "clashes between strong and weak publics" online (Clark 2020, 89). "Going viral" therefore should not be considered an abstract measurement of popularity, but rather used to describe a kind of movement: the movement of an image, video, or discourse from a small, weak public to a larger, stronger one.

As Karen spread beyond Black social media spheres where it originated and into a mainstream, White audience, she lost her link to a specific conception of race and the American public. In this process, Karen was given a new narrative, a new trial, that was based on her perceived excessive displays of emotions, her allegedly unseemly public behavior, and her physical appearance, such as the "Karen haircut" (Martinez 2022). In contrast to the alliterative name meme, the form of the Karen meme does not require that the video or image engage with anti-Blackness at all. Rather, like the logic of digital media, Karen's meaning is determined by the individual viewer and the rules, norms, and expectations of the specific online space it is posted to. The meme is still gendered, but as Lewis (2020) herself points out, even Donald Trump has been called a Karen. After moving from predominantly Black to predominantly White online spaces, the Karen meme now has little to say about anti-Blackness as climate.

I focus on this shift from the alliterative name meme to the Karen meme to highlight the limitations of attempting to use the trial form to expose and redress anti-Black injuries. The trial relies on visuality and exposure, and these memes follow this logic by presenting videos of anti-Black harassment to online audiences of thousands. However, as Stuart Hall (2021) identifies in his media theory of encoding and decoding, the problem at the heart of all media forms reliant on mass dissemination is that there is no way to guarantee that viewers will see what they are intended to see. Viewers choose how to decode and render the meme in conversation with discourses, narratives, and images they have previously encountered. The existence of multiple potential decodings is also legitimized by the trial. Jurors do not have to accept the narratives given to them by the prosecution or defense; they are allowed to discard and reinterpret evidence according to their own narratives and speculations and can even nullify the trial itself (Clover 2019). At the same time, not all discourses and frameworks are treated equally; there is a dominant cultural code through which we are encouraged to render meaning (Hall 2021). Anti-Blackness is one such dominant cultural code. In the American legal and media tradition it has been the case that evidence of injuries—real or alleged—of certain groups have been given much greater weight than others, often at the expense of Black life (Heffernan 1999). Seeing a Karen video and concluding that the video's producer or the meme itself is misogynist does not represent a failure to see properly, but rather an active decision to render the video within a dominant discourse of anti-Blackness, to not see the Black complaint. This is not a failure of the trial form; it is the success of the hegemonic code.

By using the trial form to attempt to legitimate Black injuries, we therefore find ourselves operating within the standards of visuality and representation that are fundamentally hostile to acknowledging anti-Blackness as anything other than the actions of individual bad actors. A potential alternative to the trial form lies in the Black complaint.

"Hide Your Kids, Hide Your Wife": The Forgotten Complaint of the "Bed Intruder Song"

This paper's theorization of Black complaint draws from Sara Ahmed's analysis of complaint as a form of non-reproductive labor: the labor of intervening into a situation in the hopes of preventing the reproduction of a problem (2021, 163). As Ahmed argues, "not reproducing an institutional legacy could be described as *the work of complaint*" (164). The legacy of Black complaint as non-reproductive labor is grounded in the tradition of Black critical theory and Black radical thinkers. Of note is the anti-lynching activism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Born in 1862 to enslaved parents, Wells-Barnett investigated and wrote commentaries on lynching, which

she published first in the Black newspaper the *Memphis Free Speech* and later in two pamphlets, *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record* (Norwood 2017). Wells-Barnett's writing on lynching functions as both documentation—detailing the facts of each case she researched alongside statistics—and intervention. Her work led her to claim that rather than being a response to the alleged crimes of Black individuals, lynchings were a reaction of an anti-Black climate to Black success and a product of White patriarchal anxieties towards the possibility of sexual relationships between Black men and White women (Wells-Barnett 1892). She further emphasized the necessity for Black people to protect themselves and their families when the legal system refused to, including advising her readers to take up arms. Wells-Barnett's work, along with countless other Black men, women, and queer individuals, provides us with a model of Black complaint. It is this model that I drew from when describing the alliterative name meme as a visual archive of collective experience. Black complaint is both a recording and an intervention.

My theory of Black complaint also draws from Meredith Clark's (2020) and Lisa Nakamura's (2015) work on complaint as a form of marginalized digital labor. Just as the pamphlets, memoirs, novels, and manifestos of the Black radical tradition have historically sought to prevent the reproduction of lynching, discrimination, economic exploitation, and sexual violence against Black people, the viral videos of Permit Pattys and Karens do the work of non-reproductive labor by attempting to stop the reproduction of quotidian anti-Black surveillance. Nakamura argues that the labor of calling out "toxic social environments in digital media" largely falls on women of color, and that this labor is not compensated—except with "affective currencies" such as likes—even though it benefits all users in online spaces and creates space for new kinds of communities (2015, 106.) Though Nakamura considers such labor to be reproductive, the call-out better maps onto Ahmed's concept of the work of complaint as non-reproductive. In creating new kinds of online communities, the work of the call-out intervenes to stop the reproduction of harmful behaviors and toxic environments. Similarly, Clark (2020) argues that the call-out, "dragging," and "cancel culture" are all digital discursive practices that originated in online Black countercultures. The call-out and the memetic hashtag are labors of education and community management, and within this frame being "canceled" should be read "as a last-ditch appeal for justice" (Clark 2020, 89). However, as Clark points out, these discursive practices are not often viewed as legitimate complaints in White mainstream online and offline spaces—where these practices are instead rendered as fundamentally irrational witch hunts and "cancel culture" (89).

The refusal to render the call-out as a complaint represents what Ahmed describes as methods for stopping complaints. A key feature of the history of Black complaint is that the complainant themselves becomes the source of complaint. In the spring of 1892, Wells-Barnett condemned the "old thread-bare

lie that Negro men rape white women," noting that the frequency of this justification for lynching threatened to expose to a larger audience both the sexual agency of White women and their frequent willingness to incite lynchings to avoid patriarchal sanctions. In response to her claim, the office of the *Free Speech* was destroyed by a White mob and Wells-Barnett was forced to flee Memphis. Notably, Wells-Barnett (1892) reproduced a response to her complaint from a contemporary White newspaper in *Southern Horrors*: "If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch who utters these calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears."

The threats made against the author of Wells-Barnett's commentary—assumed to be a Black man—demonstrate how Black complaint is rendered as itself injurious as a method of stopping complaint. Not all complaints are non-reproductive labor (Ahmed 2021, 170). The reproduced excerpt expresses the White complaint to Wells-Barnett's words by using the trial's adversarial and punitive framing of redress: if the Black community did not remedy Wells-Barnett's allegedly injurious comments about White women, it would be the "duty" of all White male citizens to seek redress on behalf of White women by torturing the Black complainant. Wells-Barnett's intervention into the crisis of lynching was rendered by the White community as the source of injury to those who benefit from the reproduction of a problem, environment, or—to draw from Sharpe (2016)—the prevailing weather.

Though they operate in different historical contexts, Wells-Barnett's work of complaint and the alliterative name meme's transformation into the Karen meme both demonstrate how the rendering of Black complaint in mainstream White public spaces operates as a tactic of stopping or drowning out Black complaint. For Wells-Barnett, the mob violence represented an attempt to stop her complaint by silencing her, both metaphorically by destroying the office of *Free Speech* and literally via the threats made against her life. However, silence and erasure are not the only ways to stop complaint. In a reversal of the logics of visuality, the circulation of a complaint outside of the space in which it was created and for whom it was intended, particularly online, can be a very effective way of stopping complaint. The alliterative name meme's transformation from a visual archive of collective experience into the contested and de-racialized Karen meme is not the first time that Black complaint has been revised and reframed by the White supremacist logics of viral internet content. One example I remember as a Black zillenial is the popular 2010 "Bed Intruder Song."

Figure 3. Antoine Dodson in the original local news interview. Source: Carvin 2010

In the summer of 2010, Huntsville, Alabama resident Antoine Dodson was recorded by local news reporters discussing his interruption of a home invasion and attempted sexual assault of his sister, Kelly. In contrast to the conversational if restrained tones of the White news anchor and reporter who introduce the segment, Dodson—with his red bandana, expressive head gestures, and the unidentifiable white object that he points at the camera—stands out as visually distinct from the typical local news ambience. Dodson never appears to answer a question during the segment, but instead addresses his statement directly to the television audience and to the home invader. As he speaks the phrase that would soon be heard by millions, Dodson draws out his words as if to make sure those watching can hear him clearly, before speeding up in time with the back-and-forth punctuating movement of his head: "He's climbing in your windows, he's snatching your people up, trying to rape them, so you need to hide your kids, hide your wife, and hide your husband, because they're raping everybody out here" (Carvin 2010).

The clip quickly went viral. Most notably, it was remixed by the White YouTubers the Gregory Brothers into the "Bed Intruder Song." A parody of an R&B hit, Dodson's impassioned address to his community becomes the chorus, looping autotuned sound bites of Dodson instructing viewers to "Hide your kids, hide your wife." The "Bed Intruder Song" proved incredibly popular, reaching #89 on the Billboard Charts and was the most viewed video on YouTube in 2010 after professionally produced music videos (Peters 2010).

The commercial success of the "Bed Intruder Song" lies in the video's sound. The most iconic aspect of the video is Dodson's own words, which include Dodson's instruction to the viewer described above as well as his address to his sister's

attacker while pointing at the camera: "You don't have to come and confess that you did it. We're looking for you." Dodson's instructions to the attacker place the video's viral sound back within the context of an attempted crime, a jarring reminder that Dodson's original statements were an expression of the claim to injury, both by Kelly, who is herself interviewed in the segment, and by Antoine on his sister's behalf. Notably, Dodson doesn't appeal to the viewer for help locating the attacker. Instead, he co-opts the television camera as a platform through which he will speak the arrest of sister's attacker into being. I previously highlighted the phrase "rendering a verdict," which refers to the practice of reading the jury's decision to a court. In this segment, Dodson renders his own verdict against the attacker, assuring him that they have proof of his guilt through their own testimony and that they will find and bring the attempted rapist to justice. Dodson's declaration "You [the attacker] can run and tell that, homeboy" therefore performs a strikingly similar intervention as the Permit Patty video's "The whole world gonna see you, boo," both evoking a certainty that their respective interventions into an unjust situation will render real justice.

However, the work of complaint that Dodson's interview engages in was revised and redefined when his words were autotuned and remixed into a commercially successful song. Unlike the direct threats of violence aimed at Wells-Barnett, the "Bed Intruder Song" blocks complaint by engaging in a digital form of "commodity racism"—the adoption and reproduction of racist icons as popular consumer products (Osucha 2009). The commodification of Dodson's interview into the "Bed Intruder Song" suggests that Black complaint and Black grief is only legible to White culture as entertainment. The "Bed Intruder Song" was only the first in a series of songs and clips made from remixing a Black person's account of a traumatic or newsworthy event that went viral online in the early 2010s.[3] This trend demonstrates that every aspect of Blackness, including Black pain, is positioned as a consumable object within American culture, as endlessly remixable and memeable. The success of the remixed video's circulation online also obscures the fact that the original video's complaint has gone unanswered. An *US Weekly* article from 2010 notes that the Dodsons were able to move into a new house after the Gregory Brothers split the proceeds from "Bed Intruder Song," before stating "Incidentally, he [Antoine] tells *US* police still have no leads" on Kelly's attacker (*US Weekly* 2010). At the time of this essay's writing, Kelly Dodson's attacker has still not been caught, though Antoine Dodson has been arrested several times (Kenneally 2011).

In addition to the problem of making Black complaint legible in a way that cannot be revised or commodified, the "Bed Intruder Song" also demonstrates the limitations of relying on the logics of visuality to bring about justice. It also raises the question of what constitutes redress. While we might feel comfortable saying that the arrest of Kelly's attacker would most certainly constitute some kind of

justice, can adequate redress for an anti-Black climate be determined so easily? Regarding the alliterative name and Karen memes, does charging the White women at the center of these encounters offer justice for victims of White supremacist surveillance? Christian Cooper (2022) notably refused to participate in the criminal case brought against his harasser, Amy Cooper, the "Central Park Karen," writing in the *Washington Post*, "I've said all along that I think it's a mistake to focus on this one individual. The important thing the incident highlights is the long-standing, deep-seated racial bias against us black and brown folk that permeates the United States." Christian Cooper's statement illustrates the limitations of turning to a trial-based framework of injury and redress for justice in a system that has historically held the Black body simultaneously responsible for and insensate to injury. The trial's approach to injury is designed to consider only individual claims to injury removed from their context within larger systems of oppression and violence. The criminal trial, therefore, cannot be relied on to dismantle the climate of anti-Blackness and may even reproduce this climate by directing attention towards individual agents of White supremacy and away from systems. The focus on shaming and mocking the individuals at the center of the alliterative name and Karen memes online similarly diverts our attention from the more difficult, less fun work of intervening in the reproduction of anti-Blackness as climate. As the commodity racism of the "Bed Intruder Song" demonstrates, embracing memes over the registers of Black grief and activism they represent is to be complicit in the silencing and revision of Black complaint. Christian Cooper's refusal to participate in the prosecution of his harasser reminds us of the foundational non-reproductive project of Black complaint.

Conclusion

We will not solve the problem of anti-Blackness by making memes, but they can provide us with a "phenomenology of the institution" (Ahmed 2021, 19), in this case the institution of White supremacy and anti-Black surveillance, that can inform our future work of complaint. The potential of the Black complaint as a form for addressing anti-Blackness and considering redress lies in its changeability. I wish to conclude by directing us back to the weather, which Sharpe refers to as where "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" but also as that which "produces new ecologies" (2016, 106). Sharpe's definition of weather also describes the work of complaint, which produces new ecologies through its intervention into singularities of a toxic climate even when the individual complaint is stopped by the dominant institution. Considering the work of complaint allows us to view Permit Pattys and Karens as singularities of an anti-Black climate. Recognizing that the weather "necessitates changeability and improvisation," that it creates the conditions for new potentialities (Sharpe 2016, 106), allows us to appreciate these memes and viral videos for what they are—not failures but stopped complaints that nonetheless advance a phenomenology of Whiteness and White supremacy. The history of Black complaint is a history of

failure, blockage, and derailment (Hartman 2008, 13). The weather changes, and the way we consider exposure, injury, and justice will have to change with it.

Notes

[1] The woman filming appears to be the child's mother and is possibly the sister of @_ethiopiangold, who originally posted the Permit Patty video to X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter, though it is worth noting that the text of the original and follow-up tweets do not state this specifically (Dr. Umar @_ethiopiangold 2018a).

[2] Lewis does mention the critique of Black feminists and women of color in her article, but her discussion of these perspectives is limited to a paragraph where she argues that the origins of the Karen meme lie just as much in White sexist online cultures as much as they do in the anti-racist work of Black women, and in a brief aside where she mentions that the Yale Collective on Women of Color and the Law issued a critique of an essay by Catherine McKinnon without elaborating on the details of the critique.

[3] Other notable examples: in 2012 a local news interview with a woman named Sweet Brown about an apartment fire produced the meme sound bite "Ain't nobody got time for that" as well as a song "I Got Bronchitis," the latter of which prompted Brown to file a lawsuit against Apple Music (Stayse 2017). A year later in 2013, Charles Ramsey's account of helping rescue three kidnapped women in Cleveland was turned into the hit song "Dead Giveaway," also by the Gregory Brothers (Kosich 2023).

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