"Don't Be a Karen": Racial Boundary Making and the Preservation of Whiteness

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to examine how white women, deemed culturally to be "Karens", employ behaviors in an effort to maintain racial boundaries and, subsequently, preserve whiteness. By relying on previous scholar's work in the sociology of whiteness, these findings aim to expand our understanding of whiteness as property to encompass things beyond material or economic wealth, to identify concrete examples of Feagin's (2020) white racial frame in practice, as well as draw connections between Feagin's (2020) work and the concept of "white habitus", which describes strong networks or associations between white people that produce favorable ideas of whiteness and negative feelings towards people of color. Utilizing digital content analysis, this research analyzed ten TikTok videos found through the utilization of the hashtag "#racistKaren" that depicts recorded conflicts between white women and people of color in public spaces. Findings include that white women were driven to initiate suspicion motivated conflicts. In doing so, they often employed a variety of tactics with the ultimate goal of getting people of color to vacate the space they were occupying. These tactics include self-policing, intentions to threaten or harm, and calling upon third party intervention. Ultimately, these findings lend further insight into the social processes white women engage in when determining who belongs in what they deem to be "white space", affirming that they are working to maintain the racial boundary and, ultimately, preserve the whiteness that accompanies that racial boundary.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term "Karen" has risen to prominent usage in contemporary popular discourse. The terminology originated on Black Twitter, which is defined as a network of culturally connected users working to draw attention to issues of concern within Black communities on the popular social media platform (Reid, 2018). The term was first utilized by this online community as a way to universally label white women engaging in racist behavior. As the term grew in cultural significance, the term was co-opted by the masses and to label someone a "Karen" meant to describe white women who are deemed angry, obnoxious, entitled, and, still, racist (Karen Meaning & Origin, 2020). However, despite the widespread usage of the term "Karen" beginning to expand, the origins of this terminology are still distinctly present throughout American society. Behavioral aspects that are often associated with "Karens" who are being racist are widely identifiable, ranging from the use of "white tears", exhibiting racist fear, and oftentimes calling the police on people of color (Armstrong, 2021). However, the widespread usage of the "Karen" label indicates there may be a larger social mechanism driving increasingly prominent, and recorded, racist behavior. More specifically, why are these instances of "Karens" so common across the demographic of white women, and what purpose are the behaviors they continuously employ serving? By exploring this phenomenon further, this research seeks to identify how white women who are engaging in what is "Karen" behavior ensure racial boundaries in public spaces and work to preserve whiteness.

Sociologists have widely established that race is not rooted in biology, rather it is a constructed racial category that has been attributed meaning to serve specific purposes throughout societal progression. In more recent years, scholars have begun to explore the social construction of whiteness, what purpose or function white identity serves, and the meanings

attributed to it as a dominant social position of power and ideology (Jacobson, 1999; Sullivan, 2006; Lipsitz, 2006; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006; Garner, S. 2007; Feagin, 2020). By utilizing this emerging area of study, whiteness can be understood not solely as a powerful, socially constructed racial identity, but explored as an ongoing process that white people engage in as they work to enforce racial boundaries. In particular, this research aims to explore how "Karen's" engage in racial boundary making, as well as why this contributes to a preservation of whiteness in what they deem to be white spaces. Relying on the technological benefits of social media, TikTok videos that have utilized the hashtag "#racistKaren" will be the content analyzed for this research. These videos depict instances of conflict with white women that are recorded by individuals of color and then uploaded onto the popular social media site. Subsequently, these findings indicate that "Karens" engage in racial boundary making through behaviors such as self-policing, tactics intended to threaten or harm, and calling the police. These tactics are used in conflicts initiated by white women that are suspicion motivated, often when white women assume people of color are engaging in criminal, suspicious, or "wrong" behavior.

There is a need to examine the multi-faceted cultural phenomenon that is a "Karen". More specifically, the behaviors these white women engage in are beyond just blatant racism. Rather, Karens engage in a plethora of behaviors that allow them to exercise their whiteness and privilege against people of color in public space as a way to reaffirm their own racial identity. Furthermore, these suspicion-motivated conflicts come to fruition through the activation of white women's white racial frame when the boundaries of white space are perceived to have been threatened or broken. These findings expand sociological understanding of a variety of existing theoretical concepts and current literature. First, the origins of conflict in these recorded "Karen" scenarios range from minor to non-existent, often with white women policing the presence of

people of color simply for occupying public space such as community pools, sidewalks, residential streets, among many others. There is no real investment in protecting any sort of personal or monetary property for these white women, and thus Harris'(1993) discussion of whiteness as property should be extended to include property that is not only material and economic, but immaterial, social boundaries as well. Second, the ability to view these videos in such a large quantity provides a prime example that helps to further illustrate Feagin's (2020) white racial frame in action. Not only are these white women activating their white racial worldview, but they serve as a demonstration of the subtle ways their behavior communicates racist thinking and inevitably harms the individuals of color they engage with. More broadly, this clarifies the social mechanisms behind a culturally created phenomenon that identifies everyday acts of racism. Lastly, this research works to link the white racial frame that elevates the status of whiteness to Bonilla-Silva's (2006; 2017) concept of "white habitus". Developing this connection elucidates how "white habitus" does not only include close white associations, but also self-segregated spaces, for example neighborhoods, that allow for the preservation of whiteness, and, subsequently, the white racial frame, to continue. Thus, how whiteness is maintained and racial boundaries are ensured can be identified through these white women who are to be deemed be a "Karen".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Among those who research race relations and racial identity, the exploration of white racial identity and the mechanisms in which it has and continues to manifest has increased within the discipline of sociology. Through this research, scholars have established that the white racial identity was created in order to legitimize the subjugation of people of color. Racial formation

historically has come into existence through utilizing essentialist reasoning that ascribes absolute value and meaning to racial categories for the justification of colonialism and enslavement (Jacobson, 1999). DuBois (1920) is one of the earliest thinkers to deconstruct the function of racialization as something not rooted in a natural difference, but rather a construction of symbolic meaning that positions whiteness as akin to morality and the accumulated power that allows for "the ownership of the earth". This construction emphasizes the morality of white people while presuming an inherent deviance of people of color, especially in regards to Black bodies (Feagin, Vera & Batur, 2000; Rudman & Ashmor, 2007). Thus, the assumption that race stems from something essential does not fully encapsulate the dynamic of power and self-definition that has resulted in contemporary racial formation, revealing there is nothing inherently, naturally bound to any one racial identity. It must be understood that race, particularly whiteness, manifests not necessarily as a "thing", but an active process. This process constructs and reifies boundaries, and when said boundaries are established, they are done so in order to maintain a position of power (Garner, 2007). However, the specific mechanisms in which this is done and the reasons for doing so are understudied. Through the utilization of "Karen" videos uploaded to the popular social media platform TikTok, this research seeks to ascertain that these white women are working to maintain racial boundaries in public spaces in an effort to preserve whiteness.

Previous scholars have identified the way in which the creation and maintenance of whiteness operates to hoard economic capital in order to tangibly maintain this power (Lipsitz 2006, Harris, 1993). This is not solely for the purpose of racial subordination, but also the active efforts to uphold whiteness as the ideal and deserving group of societal "wealth". Racial boundaries persist because of white people's active interest and investment in the maintenance of

whiteness for social, political, and material gain. These scholars establish that the preservation of whiteness is deeply embedded in these larger social institutions, but how this investment in whiteness manifests in everyday interactions leaves more to be discovered. Whiteness as a racial identity works to maintain power in a variety of ways and this is demonstrated through its adaptability to societal progression. This is most understandable through Feagin's (2020) white racial frame, which describes an overarching worldview that is both created, modified, and utilized by white people navigating American society. The white racial frame describes white people being socialized with a positive emphasis on white individuals and white identity while simultaneously crafting negative racial stereotypes, narratives, targeted emotions and images, and, most importantly, sanctioned discriminatory actions towards people of color (Feagin, 2020). Although it is widely understood that race is not rooted in any form of tangible biology, racial identity, and particularly whiteness, is very socially real because of the value it has historically been attributed (HoSang, LaBennett, & Pulido, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2014; Ray, 2022). Essentially, whiteness cannot exist without the creation of other racial identities, and it cannot wield power without the dichotomous moral and societal attributes that make it favorable in a larger societal context.

In addition, this can be understood through the concept of "white habitus", which refers to a set of strong networks and associations among white people. These associations work to maintain racial order by fostering racial solidarity among whites and negative feelings toward racial "others" (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). "White habitus" functions as a result of racial segregation, and can be extended beyond these described networks discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2017) and to the physical spaces white people inhabit. Where this concept and its relationship to the preservation of white identity culminates has to do with the efforts white people engage in to

maintain these networks through racial boundary making. Racial boundary making involves white people actively surveilling spaces deemed to be preserved for whiteness in order to identify breaches of the boundary by people of color. This racialized surveillance is not static or only applied to particular individuals, but it does rely on certain techniques in order to reify boundaries along racial lines, and, in doing so, it reifies race (Browne, 2015; Brucato, 2020). Additionally, whiteness and its subsequent development of "white habitus" have a strong historical relation to public space (Blitvich, 2021). White identity as a mechanism of power is not just a tool utilized by institutional forces of power, but by any and all white people who invoke actions, such as through surveillance, that legitimize the boundaries of white space. In white spaces, people of color have been surveilled, often with forms of violence, or threats of violence, as well as determinations made by white people what spaces they are or are not allowed to occupy (Blitvich, 2021). Thus, whiteness provides white people the power to reify their own racial boundaries, and, subsequently, their own racial identity.

The focus of this research is on the way in which physical space works in conjunction with racial boundary maintenance. Sullivan (2006) identifies that although space is often thought of as neutral, it is actually raced in ways that reaffirm the machinations of whiteness and, thus, is racially bounded. The point of contention arises when the intended racialization of white space is made salient by the racialized non-white bodies that inhabit it and the subsequent behavior of white people that follows to reify that racial boundary. The possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006) extends beyond economic and political capital, encapsulating the interpersonal behavior of white people to reestablish their white racial dominance through the surveillance, control, and policing of non-white bodies assumed to be "inhabiting space as if it was theirs in which to transact freely and expansively" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 149). In a contemporary context,

what is commonly understood to be "Karen" behavior is a continuation of this practice classified by cultural discourse (Blitvich, 2021). Thus, in an age of technology, what is left to be analyzed is the actions and social processes white people engage in when surveilling people of color in raced spaces, and how those actions are for the purpose of maintaining racial boundaries and preserving whiteness in what is deemed to be white spaces.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach is suitable for understanding the mechanisms that demonstrate how "Karens" maintain racial boundaries in an effort to preserve whiteness. More specifically, through qualitative content analysis, this research aims to uncover the preservation of whiteness by white women through the policing of people of color in public spaces and how this preservation stems from racial boundary making. By analyzing videos depicting encounters where white women interrogate, harass, and even call the police on people of color in everyday life, these videos provide firsthand insight into social interactions that exhibit everyday enactments of white racial dominance. Data collection will be conducted through the popular and publicly accessible social media platform TikTok in order to access a wide range of video content. Utilizing the hashtags "#racistKaren" will allow quick access to content that corresponds to my research question. Video collection based on this hashtag is for the purpose of examining how the label is utilized by other individuals, rather than ascertaining on one's own. The reason TikTok was the chosen site of study is its ability to provide primarily visual, recorded content that is easily accessible, whereas other social media sites are more text and photo based. For this research, ten videos have been collected and analyzed in order to identify the salient manifestations of "Karen" behavior and its relationship to racial boundary making. Additionally,

these videos have been limited to being posted or filmed within the last two years in order to more accurately represent how whiteness is currently and actively maintained through the policing of others within American society.

Furthermore, the videos being used for this analysis consist of at least one individual who is perceived to be a white woman and one individual who is perceived to be a person of color. While perceptions of racial identity do not translate into anything reflective of one's own personal identification, perception here is rendered important because it is how these interactions come to fruition in the first place. Additionally, these videos must clearly exhibit the white women's dialogue and physical body within them, whereas this is not a requirement for the people of color who are subject to this interaction, as they are often the one's recording the encounter. Lastly, since the convergence with racial identity and racialized spaces is integral to understanding these social processes, the videos utilized within this study must depict encounters occurring in what is identifiably a public space. It is not required, however, that these videos inherently contain explicitly racist behavior or actions, such as the use of discriminatory racial slurs. This is due to the fact that racial discrimination exists outside of explicitly racist actions, which is in line with the purpose of this analysis.

In order to analyze the data acquired, the videos are viewed and immediately written up in field notes, which provide a detailed written account of the events at the researcher's disposal. These fieldnotes have been coded in order to identify emerging patterns of phenomena within the content being viewed. This process was followed by memos, a qualitative writing technique that allowed for the elaboration of prominent themes present throughout the data, as well as exploration of any points of contention or salience that may be worth addressing throughout the analysis. These developed themes have become the focus of this analysis. With previous research

establishing the structural mechanisms that situate white identities in a place of power and privilege, utilizing grounded theory in this instance operates to uncover the specific mechanisms in which this is executed through interpersonal interactions between white women and people of color in public spaces. Essentially, the function of this data not only provides an unfiltered, first hand, and more direct account of the interactions taking place and being examined, but the qualitative approach in which the data is handled provides deeper insights into how whiteness is preserved through the policing of people of color in an effort to maintain racial boundaries.

ANALYSIS

"Karen" is a term that in a contemporary context encompasses a wide variety of defining attributes as its utilization in mainstream popular culture continues to expand. Given the origin of the terminology, labeling someone to be a "Karen" is to identify prominent racist behaviors and actions enacted by white women. Through this research, the understanding of what it means to be a "Karen" deepens through identifying the behaviors and actions of these individuals are intentionally driven by certain motivating factors. Most prominently, "Karens" are motivated by the need to enact racial boundaries for the purpose of maintaining whiteness in what they strive and perceive to be white spaces. White spaces include almost everything ranging from neighborhoods to shopping malls to public sidewalks and pools, among others included in the data collected for this research. In these spaces, racial boundary making comes to fruition through initiated conflict about a particular problem, often minor or non-existent. These conflicts are primarily suspicion motivated, with white women perceiving some form of harm to themselves from individuals of color in public spaces or assuming ill intentions as a result of a person of color occupying a particular public space. Overall, the data reveals that the ultimate

goal of white women in these interactions is to get individuals of color to vacate the space in which they are present or to prevent access to the space they are attempting to enter. Thus, to be labeled a "Karen" is to be distinctly tied to policing the bodies and movements of people of color and reinforcing racial boundaries in order to preserve whiteness in what they deem to be white spaces.

Self-Policing

How "Karen" behaviors manifest in these instances of conflict takes a multitude of forms. Most prominently, white women engage in a plethora of efforts to self-police both the conflict in which the parties are navigating and the individuals of color involved. Describing this process as "self-policing" encapsulates the aspects of their behaviors that align with the interrogation and authority associated with institutional policing. Self-policing at its core includes making demands, specifically in regards to personal information and for compliance to directions. While the perception of authority by individuals of color does not necessarily equate to the authority of the police, and thus does not necessitate them to comply in many instances, the self-ascribed authority on the part of these white women is what drives the demands they make. By making demands, these white women's goal is to produce a favorable outcome within the space they are navigating the conflict. Particularly in instances in which white women are initiating suspicion motivated conflicts, this takes the form of asking for proof of residence in the area, inquiring about personal identifying information, and asking to vacate the space in which these individuals are occupying. In some instances, these demands are coupled with white women physically blocking entryways into buildings or other spaces with their bodies in an effort to preserve the boundaries of the space.

In order to understand how a "Karen" engages in self-policing requires a deeper examination of the demands that they are making of individuals of color. Classifying their excessive questioning as demands assists in demonstrating the behavior as rooted in power. This power is a racialized dynamic, and thus white women's expectation that the individuals they question should comply with the subsequent answers fuels the authority they are attempting to exert. For example, the following fieldnote except demonstrates this white woman's demands in the context of a suspicion motivated conflict. In this instance, a white woman questions a man of color parked alongside the curb of a residential street waiting for his friend:

> *As the camera focuses, the [white] woman starts walking towards the camera. Faintly, you can hear her state "Who are you waiting for?". She continues to approach the camera. The man filming replies to her "My friend", in a neutral flat tone… In a deeper voice, she responds asking "Who's your friend?". His voice rises in pitch slightly while responding, stating "I don't know! They sent me the address. So I'm just in the neighborhood.". She repeats the question, asking "Who's your friend?". He replies to her saying "You don't need to know my friend". She pauses."There's a lot of people stealing a lot of stuff", she says, eyebrows furrowed. He responds quickly, stating "I'm not going to steal anything". Her eyebrows lower, her voice deepens and she says to him "Oh well we don't know that, do we?".*

In this excerpt, it becomes evident that the white woman's efforts to ascertain information is driven by her suspicion of the individual. While it could be argued that this white woman is concerned about theft in her neighborhood, efforts to ensure the racial boundary is not being broken continue even when the man of color provides a reason for his presence in the neighborhood. In order for the man of color's presence in the space to be considered valid, the white woman insists on some form of sufficient information to be produced as evidence,

otherwise he is deemed out of place. This kind of questioning is a common occurrence throughout the rest of the videos collected for this research and exemplifies that the space is racialized. When white women are expecting the space to be reserved for whiteness, individual of color's presence in those spaces are thus subjected to suspicion and questioning. The reason this is considered to be "self-policing" is because the demanding aspect of this line of questioning is an attempt to exert power and authority over the space in question. Despite the fact that, in all instances, the individuals of color have the right to occupy the space for whatever purpose, whether that be residential, public, or work related, their refusal to comply and give personal identifying information fuels white women's efforts to secure the racial boundary.

In all instances, these demands for information coincide with efforts to get individuals of color to vacate the space that they are occupying. This comes in a multitude of forms, whether that be explicitly asking to leave the site of conflict or preventing access to the space they are attempting to enter. In all the videos collected, there is a distinct effort on the part of white women to make it known that, ultimately, they expect these individuals of color to exit the space they are inhabiting at that moment. This expectation closely follows after the aforementioned efforts to obtain proof of access, which are never satisfied despite efforts to mitigate and de-escalate by the individuals they are questioning. Thus, white women deem a lack of sufficient proof and compliance as grounds to now enforce the racial boundary. In this fieldnote excerpt, a white woman is accusing a woman of color of sleeping in her car on a residential street, even when the woman of color clarified that she was just taking a work-related phone call in the privacy of her vehicle:

> The woman filming begins speaking, saying "I was never sleeping, I had a meeting with
> my boss. My mom works from home. She was on a call, so I came-". She [the white
> woman] cuts off the woman who is speaking, asking her "What's your address?". She

then crosses her arms in front of her chest again before stepping out of view of the

camera. The woman behind the camera says "I don't need to tell you my address".

Quickly, the [white] woman then states "Where's your mom?". The woman filming

replies "It doesn't matter, it's not your business"... In response, the [white] woman says

"Then leave the neighborhood".

This excerpt is an excellent representation of the process that white women engage in throughout these conflicts. Earlier in this particular video, the woman of color states that she is a resident in the neighborhood, but this claim is not sufficient in deterring the suspicion motivated behavior of the white woman's demands. More broadly, this trend is prevalent throughout the other videos collected. Not only are individuals of color asked to vacate their own neighborhoods, but they are also asked to move off public sidewalks, to leave parking lots, and are physically blocked from accessing buildings as they engage in various forms of employment. White women sometimes justify this demand to vacate by explicitly claiming the space as "mine", yet again drawing the racial boundary throughout the duration of the conflict. Furthermore, while it is infrequent for individuals of color to concede to these demands, often because their access to the space is warranted, the right that white women feel they have to request someone to exit lends additional insight into the differential power being wielded. Thus, by requesting that this individual "leave the neighborhood", this white woman, among the many others throughout this research, actively engages in racial boundary making.

Tactics to Threaten or Harm

In almost all the videos collected, "self-policing" is coupled with tactics intended to threaten or harm the individuals of color they are engaging with. As previously mentioned, the conflict at hand is often minor or non-existent, and thus when individuals of color are resistant to

demands for information, white women's behavior escalates in severity in order to re-establish authority and take control over the situation. In all instances, yelling or shouting is a prominent behavior that is enacted throughout the duration of the recorded conflict. This coincides with white women's repeated demand making and rises in intensity as their attempts to exert authority wield minimal compliance from individuals of color. On occasion, this is coupled with mocking and, in one instance, a white woman actually growling at a person of color. While these behaviors are not explicitly stated threats, it does convey a threatening nature and amplifies the tension of the conflict, often leading to other behaviors with that intention. These actions often include invading the personal space of individuals of color, despite every instance in which these individuals ask white women to keep a distance. On some occasions, this invasion of personal space is also met with physical threats or direct physical contact, most prominently hitting or striking. What these behaviors are intended to do is to convey white women's desire for individuals of color to not be occupying a particular space. By engaging in tactics intended to threaten or harm, white women are perhaps anticipating that this will result in the person of color giving up and, thus, vacating the space.

Throughout data collection, white women's efforts to invade the personal space of individuals of color is a dominant trend. As the conflicts continue to escalate over miniscule issues, the people of color recording would often attempt to create physical distance between them and the white women they were engaging with. In response, white women would move to close the physical gap between them, oftentimes quickly and with rapid movement. In this video, a man of color is attempting to complete a delivery order when a white woman in the vehicle behind him stops, pulling up alongside him. In doing so, she continues on to accuse him of tailgating the vehicle in front of him, despite his claims that he was not doing so:

He closes the door, and immediately states "Ma'am do not follow me", while pointing the camera at the fuel door on his car. She shouts "These are my neighbors! These are my neighbors!". He raises his voice slightly, responding back to her "You're following me! Do not, you're following me! That's fine, now you're doing too much" he chuckles. He continues speaking to her, saying "Now you're invading my privacy". His reflection is visible in his vehicle, revealing the lower half of his body as he stands still, holding his phone in one hand and the plastic bag of food he retrieved from his backseat in the other. "I'm not invading your privacy", she states to him. She is still standing on the other side of his vehicle behind the trunk of his car. "You are", he states, "Do not follow me. Let me work"... He begins to walk alongside his vehicle towards the front of the car. As he comes around the front end of the car, the camera, pointing slightly down at the road, reveals the woman walking out around the car at the same time, showing her legs. He states to her "What is your problem?". She is standing across from him now, in the street with no barrier between them.

In this particular situation, both parties were located inside their respective vehicles when the conflict was initiated. As a resolution between the two of them was becoming more unlikely, the man of color attempted to resume his employment responsibilities and complete the delivery. As he exits his vehicle, so does she, and as he moves back away from her, she moves closer towards him. This continues until both parties are in the street with no form of physical barrier between them, despite his protesting for her to leave him alone and to "stop following" him. This example is one of many throughout the videos collected and exemplifies a larger pattern that is present within these suspicion motivated conflicts. Not only are white women engaging in a form of threatening behavior by invading people of color's personal space, but the simple fact that they feel they can do so over something as minor as tailgating, for instance, is another indicator of the power dynamic stemming from these interactions.

Furthermore, white women will sometimes reciprocate filming in these instances of conflict as another way to solidify the power they have over the situation. While filming on their part is not inherently a threatening or harmful tactic, situating it in the context of these interactions reveals their motivation for choosing to do so. In almost all videos, the individuals of color who are filming state explicitly that filming functions as a form of protection. This statement is often in response to white women's pleas or demands that they stop filming them. The need for this protection is directly related to participants' verbal acknowledgement of the racialized power imbalance at play. Subsequently, when the individual filming refuses to stop doing so, white women will sometimes begin filming the interaction on their own smartphone devices. However, this reciprocal filming does not function as a form of protection for white women. Instead, it functions as a form of tacit incrimination. Through this particular fieldnote excerpt, this idea becomes clearer as a white woman attempts to get young teenagers of color to vacate a public sidewalk so she can walk by with her young daughter. As the teenagers protest, the white woman begins filming them back:

> The [white] woman talks over her, raising her voice again and saying sternly "Move out of my way. You don't tell me what I say and stop filming me". The girl responds, saying "No, this is for protection because we see this on the internet". The [white] woman talks over her, saying "Okay, I'll film you too". The boy in the red sweatshirt says "That's fine". The girl filming, turning towards the boy, says "[child's name], this is our first Karen. Oh my god". As she says this, the woman yells over her "You need to move out of the way so I can walk my disabled daughter on the sidewalk". The woman continues, saying "I am posting this on [neighborhood watch page], so your parents will see this. Are you saying you're refusing to move for my disabled daughter to walk on the sidewalk?". The girl says quietly in response "We didn't say that, we didn't say that".

The video is pointed towards the street, only showing a house in the distance and the young [white] girl's blurred face as she stands alongside the [white] woman. The woman responds, saying "Then please move".

What this excerpt demonstrates is the difference in purpose that filming does for each party. In this particular scenario, the white woman threatens to post her video on a neighborhood watch social media page in an attempt to get them in trouble if they do not cooperate. For people of color, filming operates as a form of protection or proof that can be utilized to disprove falsely accused behavior in the face of institutional authority figures. On the other hand, filming for white women acts as a tactic intended to threaten or harm as a way to induce compliance from individuals of color. Filming is coupled with structured questions that produce a particular narrative, often one that is inaccurate. Consequently, that inaccurate narrative functions to informally incriminate people of color for doing something wrong, and thus justifies white women's exertion of self-assumed authority. This example does not exist in a vacuum, but rather exhibits a larger trend of behavior that white women employ with the intention to threaten or harm the individuals of color they are engaging with.

Lastly, another prominent finding throughout data collection are instances when white women resort to physical threats or, in some cases, actually engaging in some form of physical contact against people of color. While this did not occur in all the videos analyzed for this research, it happened frequently enough that it is deemed highly relevant in the context of the aforementioned tactics intended to threaten or harm. More specifically, the previously discussed instances of yelling, invading personal space, and reciprocated filming were all precursors to physical threats or actual instances of physical contact that white women chose to enact. In this specific fieldnote excerpt, two white women are attempting to force a man of color out of a

shared public elevator. Upon him beginning to film, they are screaming at him to "get out" over and over again, and the conflict continues to escalate:

> *As another hand comes into his direction, he blocks it with his left arm and he states "What is wrong with you?". In response, the [white] woman wearing glasses shouts "Don't touch me!" with both her hands up in fists, shaking them and blocking her chest. The camera catches her face as she pulls her mask down slightly to yell again "Do not touch me! Do not touch me!". She then pulls her mask back up. With her right hand, she swings the iPhone she is holding into the hand he is using to film. There is a loud "thud" as his camera is hit, creating a quick, blurry image. She then points her iPhone camera back at him, blocking her face. The man raises his voice, stating "Did you just hit me? Did you just hit me?". One of the women, which cannot be ascertained due to the frantic movement of everyone involved, states "You just hit me!".*

This particular altercation demonstrates the structure that these conflicts progress in. For a reason unknown in this video, these white women want this man of color to exit the elevator they are all sharing. As he refuses to comply, the intensity of the situation escalates to them engaging in tactics intended to threaten and harm him. They invade his privacy by backing him into a corner, they shout demands at him, and subsequently hit him and reciprocate filming in an attempt to alter the narrative of the interaction. This excerpt, although more intense than other recorded instances, demonstrates the way in which these tactics are intertwined and create a pattern of escalation. Furthermore, these white women appear to not be responding to an inherent threat to their physical well-being, rather they are engaging in behavior with the intention to threaten this man enough that he will vacate the space. The ability to employ these tactics, even while being filmed, are a result of the power white women are able to utilize against people of color throughout instances of conflict in an attempt to enforce the racial boundary.

Calling on Third Party Intervention

Although all the aforementioned behaviors that white women employ to ensure a racial boundary are significant, calling on third party intervention is explicitly stated and consistent across all the videos collected. The most commonly called upon third party is the police, although in some instances this can be security or other personnel with institutionally employed authority. Nonetheless, white women call upon these third parties when previous efforts to maintain the racial boundary do not immediately result in people of color vacating the space. In the videos collected for this research, people of color do not comply with white women's requests to vacate because they are rightfully entitled to the space they are occupying. Because of this, white women's efforts to "successfully" maintain the racial boundary fall flat. Thus, for white women, their next option is to call the police. This option is contentious because the disproportionate violence unreasonably enacted against people of color, particularly Black men, at the hands of the police. Thus, for white women to call the police, it is yet another utilization of the power they wield over individuals of color. More specifically, white women will often hyperbolize and exaggerate as they relay the situation to emergency service operators because they understand how invoking racialized stereotypes rooted in "dangerous" narratives will result in a particular police response. Therefore, the importance of power in this particular act becomes salient due to their ability to control the narrative if and when they do call the police.

In many of the videos collected, white women end up calling, or at least threaten to call, the police. This is often the last tactic they resort to when they decide their previous efforts to maintain the racial boundary are ineffective, and thus calling on reinforcements is expected to produce the outcome they have been working towards. To reiterate, the goal throughout all these

distinct conflicts is to get people of color to vacate the space they are occupying. This is because

white women have ultimately decided on their own that these individuals do not or should not

have access to the space. Space is racialized, and so for white women, these spaces are white. So,

when their efforts to maintain the racial boundary fail, white women utilize the differential

power ascribed to their racial identity to achieve their goal. In the following example, a white

woman calls the police on a man of color who was hired to do a job at her home. The situation

escalates due to her suspicion that he does not actually work for the company, and results in her

calling the police:

> *As soon as the video starts, the man filming immediately states "She is literally on the*
>
> *phone with 911 right now", keeping the woman in the background in view, who appears*
>
> *to be on the phone. The [white] woman states "He's rude and he is just threatening me*
>
> *right now". The man states "Look, look at her. She said I just threatened her", as he*
>
> *makes the camera zoom in on her… He states calmly to her "What threat? What threat*
>
> *did I make towards you?"... She is still standing inside the garage with the phone to her*
>
> *ear, and her other arm covering her face as she cries. You can hear the woman take*
>
> *exasperated breaths between sentences, continuing to cry and talk in a high pitched tone*
>
> *on the phone. The man is standing still in the same position outside the garage, turning to*
>
> *face her. As he does so, she states to the person on the phone, followed by "Please,*
>
> *please. I'm so scared right now".*

In this instance, the woman is yards away from the man she is stating to be scaring her as she

stands inside her garage and he stands outside of it. Throughout the duration of her crying on the

phone, the man stands there quietly filming and asking calmly what threats she was referring to.

Although the events leading up to what was recorded cannot be ascertained, there is a

discrepancy between her behavior and his behavior at this moment, taking into account his

choice to record the situation as it unfolds. The woman's emotional response, understanding that filming is a form of protection for people of color, and the exaggerated details provided to the phone operators works to motivate the police to not only arrive on the scene more quickly, but anticipate a threat that is not actually present. By framing the narrative in this way, white women attempt to ensure police will arrive at the site of conflict ready to enforce the racial boundary. To convey how prominent this trend is, this fieldnote excerpt again demonstrates the exaggeration that white women engage in when calling on the police. This excerpt comes from one of the previously mentioned altercations between the white woman who wants two young teenagers of color to move off the public sidewalk. After arguing with them for several minutes, she ultimately calls the police:

> *The [white] woman is standing a couple feet down the sidewalk with the young girl by her side. Her smart phone is up against her ear. The girl filming shouts "She's saying that we're harassing her". The boy with her states "She said that? That's funny". The woman continues talking on the phone, stating their address which is inaudible… She pauses and looks back in the direction of the girl filming, still holding the young girl's hand at her side. The [white] woman continues, saying "Yup, and she's like filming me and being aggressive and I-". The rest of what she says is inaudible due to the girl filming's reaction, where she shouts "Oh my god! Oh my god. She's saying we're being aggressive".*

Although the circumstances between this scenario and the previous one are different, the mechanisms that each white woman is employing serve the same purpose. In the above excerpt in particular, the context leading up to the police being called is in fact provided, where the teenagers refuse to vacate the sidewalk in order to let the white woman and her child pass by. Throughout their interaction, the teenagers speak softly, ask her to state "excuse me" as she

passes, and tell her to have a good day as she begins to walk away, all while still refusing to vacate the sidewalk. In response to their non-compliance to vacate, the woman calls the police and describes them as aggressive. Again, this description to emergency services serves the purpose of preparing the police for a distinctly different encounter than what is actually occurring, with law enforcement more likely to arrive with the intention of getting these individuals of color to comply with the racial boundary. Furthermore, these actions put people of color in unnecessary danger at the hands of the police, as well as making it significantly more difficult for them to justify and explain how and why they have the right to occupy these public spaces. These excerpts are representative of other findings throughout this research, with white women calling upon police or other third parties to create a narrative that not only favors them, but incorrectly characterizes the individuals of color they are engaging in conflict with. Overall, white women who call on third party intervention are engaging in a serious, elevated effort of racial boundary making.

DISCUSSION

This research sought to identify what aspect of whiteness studies have yet to be ascertained through analyzing prominent, culturally abundant examples of everyday racism. More specifically, the purpose of this research was to expand theoretically established larger scale mechanisms of whiteness to include interpersonal interactions. Drawing on Harris' (1993) work, further exploration could extend the concept of whiteness as property beyond tangible, economic forms and see it in a new light. Conceptualizing property not exclusively as economic opens the door to viewing immaterial, social boundaries as forms of property as well. Additionally, the main focus of this research was grounded in Feagin's (2020) white racial

frame. White women deemed to be "Karens" falls in line with Feagin's (2020) work, allowing

for a deeper dive into the social processes that motivate racist behavior on such a large and

prevalent scale. Lastly, drawing connections between "Karen" behaviors and the spaces in which

they are enacted was an effort to contribute to Bonilla-Silva's (2017) concept of "white habitus".

This contribution aimed to expand "white habitus" not only in the form of close associations

between white people, but also the white spaces that allow those associations to come to fruition

in the first place. Thus, what was left to uncover was the relationship between how the

boundaries of these spaces are maintained and why this maintenance is an active effort to

preserve whiteness.

In order to do this, this research has explored the kind of behaviors of white women

deemed to be "Karens" engage in when navigating conflicts with people of color and how that

drives a larger social process taking place. This social process is the relationship between racial

boundary making and the preservation of whiteness. Overall, the findings identified that white

women who initiate conflicts in public spaces do so primarily out of suspicion. White women

being motivated by suspicion indicates that, to these white women, the presence of people of

color within these spaces warranted some form of surveillance. This surveillance paralleled

practices commonly associated with institutional policing, often with white women taking efforts

to self-police the situation through excessive demands for information. The kinds of information

they were looking for included proof of residence or employment. When this information was

deemed insufficient, it often resulted in white women demanding that people of color vacate the

area. Additionally, white women frequently employed tactics in an attempt to threaten or harm

individuals of color into complying with demands to give information or vacate the space they

were occupying. This included yelling, invading personal space, and in some instances,

physically hitting people of color. Lastly, and most prominently, was white women's lack of hesitancy to call upon third party intervention when, in every instance, people of color failed to comply with their demands. White women threatened, and in most cases did call, the police or some other security personnel in every video collected for the purposes of this research. These findings contribute to a better understanding of what exactly "Karen" behavior is and how it manifests in public spaces. More specifically, by placing an emphasis on this behavior in public space lends insight to what this behavior is intended to do. "Karens" are suspicion motivated, and thus this behavior targeted at people of color strongly indicates their effort to enforce a racial boundary in public spaces they deem to be reserved for whiteness.

The implications for these findings are significant for a multitude of reasons. First, it reaffirms the idea that whiteness as property is extended beyond personal, material wealth that white people are invested in maintaining. Rather, Harris' (1993) concept is expanded to include public space that allows for whiteness to be preserved in ways outside of economic capital. Second, the "Karen" phenomena confirmed aspects of Feagin's (2020) white racial frame by showing how the white racial frame is activated and ultimately results in an enactment of discriminatory and racist behavior against people of color. Even in instances in which people of color attempt to de-escalate the conflict and refute the accusations white women make against them, there is little attempt on the part of white women to accept these claims as accurate. This is in line with Feagin's larger argument about challenging the white racial frame and white people's reluctance to accept new information that contrasts their white racial worldview. Furthermore, this activation of the white racial frame in the context of racialized public space, however, allows for a connection to be built between the white racial frame and Bonilla-Silva's (2017) concept of "white habitus". The idea of "white habitus" is evident throughout these

recorded interactions, with white women often referring to public sidewalks, streets, and residential neighborhoods as "mine", even in instances in which the people of color claimed residence in those areas and were legitimately occupying space that belonged to them. Due to the conflicts being motivated by suspicion, "white habitus" becomes more relevant as it creates a sense of white group belonging and simultaneously creates feelings of distrust towards individuals of color. White associations, then, include these spaces, even if there is not a strong or nurtured relationship between the white people assumed to be exclusively inhabiting them, while simultaneously fostering the suspicion that drove the conflict to emerge. Overall, an in-depth analysis of "Karen" videos revealed a facet of behaviors that are in line with the activation of the white racial frame and concurrently expanded theoretical concepts of whiteness as property and "white habitus" to encapsulate spaces where racial boundaries are clearly attempted to be maintained.

Although this study yields significant findings that contribute to previously established literature on whiteness, there are several limitations to this study. First, as this is a content analysis taking place on popular social media platforms, there is no ability to verify if all videos utilized for this analysis are authentic. While it is unlikely that the majority are fabricated, it is worth mentioning considering the potential lack of context, identifiable information of the people in the video, and the propensity for accounts to repost content without giving credit to the original person who posted it. Similarly, another limitation is that the data is primarily limited to what is encapsulated within the video being analyzed. It is common on TikTok that if the user who posted the video is within the video, they may create videos that contain follow up information. However, this is not consistent across all users and so it will not be included for the purposes of consistency. Additionally, the primary subject of this research is white women and

thus further research should be conducted to ascertain expected differences in discriminatory and racist behaviors between white men and women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this research have revealed significant insights regarding white women's efforts to maintain racial boundaries in an effort to preserve whiteness in what they deemed to be white spaces. Examination of the culturally significant phenomenon of "Karens" has contextualized everyday actions of racial discrimination in prior literature on whiteness, resulting in an expansion of understanding how both racialized space and socialized ideas regarding race produce these outcomes that are unfortunately too prevalent within American society. Overall, "Karen" behavior has illuminated an increasingly visible pattern of not only blatant racism, but racism that is fueled by the desire to maintain racial boundaries in order to preserve whiteness.

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