

Querying 'Karen': The rise of the angry white woman

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Abstract

The (often memetic) figure of the white female 'Karen' has surged to prominence of late, moving from social media vernacular into broader usage at exactly the moment when twin crises of public health and racial social justice have fomented momentous change and uncertainty in American life. The angry 'Karen' is invoked to indicate her manipulation of her racial power, but she is equally significant, we suggest, for her positioning within a pre-existing antagonistic service economy.

Keywords

Gender, race, affect, consumerism, social media

The (often memetic) figure of the white female 'Karen' has surged to prominence of late, moving from social media vernacular into broader usage at exactly the moment when twin crises of public health and racial social justice have fomented momentous change and uncertainty in American life. The 'Karen' trope crystallizes a particular constellation of entitled white supremacy and class privilege into a scathing dismissal of white female anger that deserves attention, particularly to distinguish the 'Karen' from other targets of public opprobrium (see Figure 1).

Seeming to have originated on Black Twitter, the Karen is identified on Wikipedia as 'a racist white woman who uses her privilege to demand her own way at the expense of others'. The rather less objective Urban Dictionary de-emphasizes race in its definition,

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Figure 1. 'Karen' is an affective symptom of white privilege, traditional female consumer authority and, more lately, pandemic anxiety.

specifying that 'Karens take everything wrong with the typical over entitled western woman and crank it up by several thousand percent. They are a mutated subspecies that descends from the Soccer Mom'. Both Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary entries, however, centralize the demand to 'speak to the manager' as a hallmark of the type.

The pleasure of Karens, as Hank Stuever observes, depends on their getting 'exactly what they've long had coming: resistance, mockery and, in some cases, the loss of their jobs' (Stuever, 2020). To highlight and ridicule recurring patterns in the performance of white privilege, Karen joins popular tropes and hashtags circulating on Black Twitter and other social media, such as *#whitetears*. Many social justice activist spaces operate under an unspoken 'no white tears' rule, 'instilled because oftentimes, in other spaces, your emotions, and the emotions of other white people, are constantly centered, nurtured, and coddled when it comes to conversations about race' (Donnella, 2018). As Donnella argues, 'White tears can be a pointed but lighthearted way of asking someone to set aside their defensiveness for a moment and take part in the conversation at hand'. While some white celebrity feminists are seen to perform their guilt with Twitter tears rather than engage with criticism, the 2020 boom in anti-racist reading lists following the George Floyd demonstrations elevated white sociologist and diversity training professional Robin DiAngelo's (2018) book *White Fragility* to bestseller status.

Alongside white tears and white fragility, Karen clearly fits into a genealogy in which she has come to displace 'Becky', an earlier slang term for a racially naive white woman

oblivious of her privilege. In widely shared ‘explainers’ featured in online media such as *The Root*, cultural critics like Damon Young trace the genealogy of neologisms and popular memes including Becky and Karen. Young (2020a) explains, ‘A Becky convinces herself – and attempts to convince others – that her whiteness doesn’t matter. A Karen doesn’t even bother to fake it’. A key distinction between these tropes is affective: where the Becky and white tears tropes target performances of racial innocence and white guilt, respectively, Karen’s vitriol situates her differently. Yet both the Becky and Karen memes jest about a white woman’s weaponization of her privilege, employing humor to critique behaviors that may have complicated social and cultural contexts.

Karen’s timeliness derives from two features: her intensified role in a pandemic period in which anti-black state violence and the vulnerability of essential (often black and Latinx) workers have come to the fore, and her association with rage and aggression. Jennifer Weiner (2020) has identified the utility and relevance of the Karen to ‘pandemic shaming’, an emergent typologization of recognized social figures (including the anti-vaxxer who sometimes overlaps with the Karen, the white man who refuses to be emasculated by mask-wearing, etc.) whose potentially lethal selfishness has become a subject of urgent public concern.

Tying the Karen to other destructive white female-associated behaviors such as anti-vaxxer activism underscores the meme’s role in articulating the severity of the damage that such complaining women can accomplish by weaponizing white femininity. This was vividly showcased in the viral video standoff between a white woman, Amy Cooper, and a black man, Christian Cooper, in New York’s Central Park on 25 May 2020 – the same day that police murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis – that drew wide public notice and extensive press coverage (see Nir, 2020). When this ‘Central Park Karen’ refused to leash her dog as required, and Christian Cooper offered the dog a treat in the hope of compelling her to do so, in order to resume his birding activities, Amy Cooper called the police and dramatically told them she was being threatened by ‘an African-American man’. Only two months later, a new San Francisco law, the ‘CAREN Act’ (Caution Against Racially Exploitative Non-Emergencies), codifies a growing intolerance for Karen-like behavior, of which the Central Park incident has been one of the most widely reviled; a CNN news item about the law even uses the infamous image of ‘Central Park Karen’ in its illustration, demonstrating its lasting impact on US society (Ebrahimji, 2020). The scorn directed at Karen occupies a space in the contemporary cultural imagination that superficially resembles the long history of stereotypes that reference the angry black woman, a disconnect that only highlights the Karen’s position of power.

For women of color, voicing complaint often entails risk, as Sara Ahmed (2020) recounts in a conversation with an Indigenous woman academic:

the project of surviving the violence of colonial occupation led her both to complain and not to complain. Both actions – complaining and not complaining – were for her about survival, not just her own survival, but the survival of her family; her people.

The legibility of the angry woman is always inflected by race, as Brittney Cooper delineates in her popular 2018 nonfiction bestseller, *Eloquent Rage*, linking the comic stereotype of the ‘sassy Black woman’ to the angry Black feminist: ‘Angry Black Women get dismissed all the time. We are told we are irrational, crazy, out of touch, entitled, disruptive, and not team players’ (Cooper, 2018; see also Lorde, 2013 [1984]). Like Ahmed, Cooper alludes to the danger inherent in expressing anger while black, if not tempered by humor: ‘Black women turn to sass when rage is too risky – because we have jobs to keep, families to feed, and bills to pay’ (Cooper, 2018: 2).

In this sense, the angry Karen is invoked to indicate her manipulation of her racial power, even as humor provides a more socially acceptable way to couch black women’s anger. White women, including Karens, occupy positions of privilege from which they feel free to complain, which then opens them up to being ridiculed in ways that ironically overlap with Cooper’s point about the dismissal of angry Black women: being seen as ‘irrational, crazy, out of touch, entitled’. Thus, while both angry white women and angry Black women may be caricatured and dismissed, their positionalities in terms of racial power geometries are critically different.

The application of the Karen meme to women who perform their white femininity in ways that often literally endanger Black lives, Young argues, makes it a less felicitous usage because it departs from the contemptuous but humorous tone that drove Karen’s rise to online infamy. Young indicates the misogynist dimensions of the Karen meme as another reason he believes it should be retired: it

feels weird and wrong that the Karen has become the contemporary face of white supremacy when white men are way more destructive. There’s a thing happening here where white women, collectively, seem to draw more ire and contempt than white men do, and the Karen becomes a thing in a way that the ‘Ken’ never would. (Young, 2020b)

Clearly, Karen is doing particularly important work to mark an interface between (actual or attributed middle-class) white femininity and individuals/communities of color in a period in which everyday situational racisms are being increasingly called to account. She summons a boundary point between recidivist whiteness and “wokeness” at a time when many white people are both becoming more sensitized to racist micro-aggressions and put on alert to threatening breaches of public decorum. And it is apparent that Karen’s utility has heightened relevance now, in a pandemic moment marked by the charged nature of commercial (and other social) spaces. Less frequently noticed, however, may be her role in conservatively reinforcing prohibitions on white female agency in an arena in which that agency has historically been significant – that of goods and services/shopping. As a caricature of consumer entitlement, Karen is frustrated by diminished/poor service but, lacking access to any recourse in the contemporary retail environment, her dissatisfaction is staged as a racist rant and spectacle of entitlement (see Figure 2).

It is useful to situate Karen within a pre-existing antagonistic service economy that has become supercharged in spring and summer, 2020. The consumer economy into which we have been interpellated in recent years has been characterized by a transfer of work from organizations to their customers, technology platforms with high failure rates, deep devotion to byzantine bureaucratic procedures and the conspicuous and constant

valuing of high-status customers over low status ones. The resulting commercial affective culture becomes notable for the conversion of customer service encounters to transactions routinely characterized by frustration, impotence and fury. Under such conditions, the notion of the customer 'always being right' now reads as quaint.

The new norms of customer service reflect not corporate ineptitude but corporate calculation; the effective withdrawal of customer service is a specific and deliberate operational strategy (Murphy, 2016). In the antagonistic service economy, customers must go to great lengths to seek basic information and answers to queries, and if they succeed they are often treated with robotic indifference or a stilted hyper-courtesy that barely conceals institutional disdain. Corporations often pair a rise in service fees and other administrative charges with a turn toward the treatment of customers in this hostile fashion.

Such hostility also takes the form of digital discrimination, requiring customers to use the Internet who may not be in a position to do so, or who lack technical expertise to do so effectively. Waiting times to reach those companies that offer customer service by phone have soared. Of course, many firms do not make themselves available at all, proving punctilious in ensuring that queries are unlikely to progress through a highly bureaucratic system. A landmark early millennium development in this regard was the cultivation of inaccessibility by companies such as Internet-based retailer Amazon. Training staff to repeat marketing mantras and (for call center workers most particularly) to speak like machines, giving pre-scripted answers that may or may not match a customer query, acts as a further expression of the antagonism corporations direct toward customers, as does the automation of customer service phone banks and the outsourcing of customer service 'chat' and email services. Corporate desire to script all encounters between patrons and staff (when they cannot be eliminated) acts as an expression of an algorithmic culture that is intensely hostile to human diversity and messiness and flummoxed by phenomena out of compliance with models driven by the 'misuse of mathematics' (O'Neil, 2018: 49).

Neoliberal capitalism's 'squeeze' on worker/customer relations is of course also impacted by the decline of worker dignity and a range of abusive workplace practices; such abuses have now become immediately life-endangering for clerks, warehouse workers and delivery personnel, a disproportionate number of whom are Black (Smialek and Tankersley, n.d.). At such a time, the beleaguered (white, female) customer arises from a pre-existing sphere of increasingly combative micro social relations in commercial sites. Demanding to speak to a supervisor from whom she is highly unlikely to receive redress, she displays her lack of awareness of the shifts in commercial power roles. She articulates (in the form of 'Karen', inarticulately and with a racialized sense of privilege) the removal of customer agency and recourse in contemporary retail culture.

Indeed, Young points out the irony that Karens are some of the only people who have the time to sit on hold waiting to complain to a customer service representative:

everyone knows how aggravating it is to engage customer service, for *any* reason. You have to call, you have to wait and then you have to wait some more, and by the time you're done, that 45 minutes is gone from your day. But Karens just have *literally nothing else to do* but be Karens.



Figure 2. Numerous representations of the ‘Karen’ in digital culture situate her in commercial spaces clashing with front-line workers about perceived service failures.

In a circular sense, then, Karen’s white middle-class privilege enables her to perform entitlement even when it costs her in terms of the time spent waiting to complain, and when, if her complaints are taken up, they are likely to negatively impact already over-extended exploited workers.

Long before the pandemic, consumer rage flourished – notably in the aviation industry but also as a broader incipient public affect. Among her other functions, Karen also embodies the persistent cultural sanctions on women’s anger, and she defines by opposition the preference and value accorded to white women who are accommodating rather than complaining, who perform ‘resilience’ and direct their energies toward perfecting and policing their bodies (‘clean eaters’, peloton bike riders) rather than breaching public decorum.¹ Frequently denominated as ‘middle-aged’, Karen also reflects a longstanding patriarchal/postfeminist distaste for midlife women. Thus, the whiteness of Karen is central, but her age and gender constitute an axis of ambivalence, since they open her up to different forms of discrimination as well.

The rise of what Nelson D. Schwartz (2020) denotes ‘the Velvet Rope Economy’ has separated many sectors of the middle class from their traditional prerogatives of ease and access. We may note that Karen also implicitly feminizes a trope which is customarily masculine – the insecure, downwardly mobile white person who senses the ebbing of their power, authority, and security, most often conjured in representations of MAGA-apparel wearing men, ‘incels’, and, in British popular culture, right-wing male ‘gammons’. In this sense, ‘Karen’ requires recognition as a caricature of the new precarities of middle-class life. In her (increasingly doomed) efforts to exert a sense of agency in late capitalism, ‘Karen’ seems to seek an ontological reassurance that consumer capitalism is on her side (and on the side of whiteness). We suggest it is productive to consider the sources of ‘Karen’s’ misdirected anger and to deepen our sense of why she exercises such a strong hold on the public imagination.

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Note

1. Recent investigations into the issue of female anger include Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (2018) as well as Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (2018). Brittney Cooper focuses specifically on black female anger in *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018). In the popular press one vein of coverage in the pandemic has spotlighted beset and sometimes angry mothers. See, for instance, Minna Dubin (2020).

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