

White Surveillance and Black Digital Publics

February 2, 2021

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for joining our dialogue today, White Surveillance and Black Digital Publics. I'm Dr. Allissa V Richardson, and I'll be your moderator. I want to start by thanking Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. Today's conversation is an important one and I'm happy that BKC is our proud host. I'd also like to acknowledge the original indigenous caretakers of the land upon which Harvard University sits. Harvard is located on the ancestral homeland of the Massachusetts Nipmuc and Wampanoag nations. I'm a proud fellow of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. One of the biggest perks of being a fellow at BKC, is meeting incredible thinkers like Dr. Apryl Williams. I'm pleased to share space with her today, to discuss Black meme culture and its impact on calling out often deadly White surveillance. Dr. April Williams earned her PhD in sociology from Texas A and M university in 2017. She's an assistant professor in the department of Communication and Media and the Digital Studies Institute at the University of Michigan. She's also a faculty associate at the Berkman Klein Center and an affiliated researcher at NYU Center for critical race and digital studies. Her research follows two broad streams of inquiry, critical algorithm studies and cultural studies of race, gender, pop culture and identity in digital spaces. Her research can be found in several peer reviewed journals including the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, Social Sciences, the International Journal of Communication and Information, Communication and Society. Additionally, Dr. Williams has contributed to popular press outlets such as Slate, and WNYC On the Media Dr. Williams' current research and our topic for today, explores themes of communal resistance in Black meme culture. Last year, Dr. Williams studied the risk of the Karen meme, her brilliant insight into the legacy of White women's racialized surveillance of Black men, women, and children propelled her to the pages of Time magazine. Today, she'll give us an origin story of the Karen meme, she'll also explain how and why Black people have chosen memes to communicate their anxieties and frustrations about racism. Lastly, because we're situated in Harvard University's law school, she'll share the new legislature that Karen memes have inspired. So without further ado, I'd like to welcome Dr. April Williams, happy Black History Month Dr. Williams.

Happy Black History Month Dr. Richardson, and thank you again as you've already said to our hosts, BKC and thank you so much to you. You've already done so much work to put this together and I really appreciate it. You're welcome. This is such a great conversation to have, I'm so excited to share this space with you and I think before we even delve into your brilliant research, I'd like to anchor our conversation a little bit with a brief clip, to let everyone know what we're talking about when we say meme, when we talk about the so-called Karen phenomenon, and I think that this little clip from The View will highlight how one of the original Karen memes went viral and launched this digital revolution, so I'm going to share my screen with you all.

[TV Host] One of the latest chapters in the trend of White folks calling cops on Black people, for like really dubious reasons is, it's like the lady who called the cops on the Black family barbecuing in an Oakland park. And yeah, take a look.

[Woman] What's going on? [Man] Oh now she doesn't want to talk. [Woman] She doesn't want to talk now. (woman laughing)

[Woman] It's illegal to have (indistinct) grill in the park here. [Woman] What kind of grill are you not allowed and why are you so bent out of shape over them being here?

[Woman] Because it causes extra money from our city to do things when children get injured because of a charcoal explode. (woman laughing)

[TV Host] So there are some really funny things that came out of this growing backlash against, this kind of behavior and the memes that it's been generated. So here are a couple of my favorites. She's worried about Martin Luther King. (audience laughing) Here she is reporting Rosa Parks, she's off the box, (indistinct) to get off the box. (audience laughing) With Obama, hello officer, it's me Susan there's a Black man in the White House, this cannot be right, I do not feel safe. (audience laughing) And hello officer, it's me Susan, there's an obscene number of colored screaming something about Wakanda being forever. They're being led by someone called the Black Panther, I don't feel safe. (people laughing)

[Woman] Oh my God. I love that she's a self-appointed BBQ police.

[TV Host] She's the BBQ police, you know, it's been happening so often that the people are being the police are being called on people for napping while at Yale and barbecuing and service shopping for the community service on the highway,

[Woman] Out of an Airbnb.

[TV Host] For walking out of an Airbnb, looking at real estate, this just tickled me so much, because sometimes the best medicine is just to laugh. Right?

So I'll stop us there. Dr. Williams, I want us to talk a little bit about that idea of laughter being the best medicine and for some people you may think, why do we need medicine? Like what is going on? What is the heart of this meme culture really getting at? I think it's important to mention that although the women of The View did highlight the comedic brilliance of this original Karen meme, we should also remember that underneath these jokes are very real call to action that I'd like you to talk about, to realize that White women's undue surveillance can be deadly for Black people. I'm thinking specifically of Carolyn Bryant who lied about 14 year old Emmett Till groping her and whistling at her lewdly, before he left that convenience store that fateful day, in Money, Mississippi in 1955 and six decades after Till's lynching, Carolyn Bryant broke her silence to Timothy Dyson who was a Duke University professor as you know and she admitted that she lied, but in 2007, a grand jury decided not to indict her or anyone else as an accomplice in the murder. And Emmett Till's cousin Wheeler Parker said at the time "I was hoping that one day she would admit it. "So it matters to me that she did "and it gives me some satisfaction. "It's important to people understanding how the word "of a White person against a Black person was law "and a lot of Black people lost their lives because of it. "It really speaks to history, "it shows what Black people went through in those days". So Dr. Williams, I like what Wheeler said about in those days but you and I know that those days haven't really ended. So can you talk a little bit about the origins of the Karen meme and what Black satire is getting at, when it attacks that practice?

Yeah, absolutely. This is a great setup. So definitely there are two competing histories of the origin of the Karen meme and I want to put that out there front and center because I think Redditors like to lay claim to the origin of the Karen meme, sort of at the beginning of the pandemic, when people were saying Karen wants to talk to the manager of the pandemic she's upset because she can't go into grocery stores anymore without a mask, right? Like when we were saying all this conversation about White women in particular, who were mad that their freedoms, their bodily freedoms were now being patrolled now as if it was something new, right? Which is definitely, it's not anything new for women's bodies to be controlled and patrolled either. But also, there's also a long history of Black people nicknaming a White woman, especially entitled White women different nicknames, right? So for there's sort of this convergence where this process of Black people nicknaming all of these folks who are calling the police on Black individuals for non-violent, racially motivated crimes, racially motivated on the part of White people of course, in this instance, there's this convergence with the Karen meme, where before this moment we would maybe call an entitled White woman a Susan or a Becky, which my paper largely focuses on, but at the sort of moment of the pandemic and at the moment of Ahmaud Arbery's case, and also the Amy Cooper which is Central Park Karen, we had this convergence of White women showing their entitlements and calling the police on Black men, women and children, happening at the same time as the sort of height of the pandemic. And so I think that convergence really led to this Karen moment that we're living in right now.

And a lot of what we're seeing would you say is not exactly meant to be funny in the way that we're thinking of it. Can you break down a little bit why humor is being used or weaponized in this way, when there's definitely an underlying rage there at least that I can see.

Yeah, absolutely, so I think you are absolutely right, that there is an underlying rage there, right? People are mad when these things happen. It may seem to those of us who sort of have some distance as in this didn't happen in our town, or this didn't happen to our neighbor, but it's a little easier to laugh about. But for the people that it's actually happening to, this is a horrific event, right? Like I would imagine if some White person were calling the police on me and I managed to walk away alive, I would feel

like, I barely escaped with my life intact, right? That is often the feeling that Black people have after they come away from encounters with the police. And that's something that these White women may or may not understand and we can get into that a little bit more, as we sort of move through our discussion today. But certainly there's always the possibility that when the police are called someone could lose their life, a person of color, a Black person could lose their life right? We've seen that over and over and over again throughout the past decade and throughout the preceding 200 years, right? This is not a new thing, but on the other hand, there's also the idea that humor really helps us to cope with trauma, especially as a collective, there's lots of research from social psychologists, from biologists even, who document that humor can help people to cope with physical pain and also emotional pain, right? There's always the saying that laughter is the best medicine and we've actually found that to be true in a lot of cases, that humor can really help you to release the stress. And so I like to think of the memes in particular as this collective release of stress, people are laughing together to laugh through the pain of, oh someone could have died today, right? And not only that and we'll talk a little bit more about this too but the memes really act as a stand in on media reporting where they might otherwise not be any.

Can you give us a definitely briefly of what a meme is, for those of us who maybe are new to this term, can you break down what is a mean?

Right, so a meme comes from memetic, which is a shorthand, it's like a cultural shorthand, cultural signifier for an amalgamation of images, right? So to participate or decode a meme, you sort of have to be embedded in that culture. So different memes can speak to different subcultures, and different overall cultures, right? And there are memes that predate the internet, a lot of people may or may not know that. So we are talking specifically about internet memes and the internet culture that produces these memes, these coded images that have a lot of inter-textuality meaning that to decode a message you often need to be in conversation with a lot of the different images that those means reference.

So for example, like the one that we saw in The View if you didn't watch Black Panther you may not know that Wakanda forever is one of the chants that they give. Is that an

example of what you're talking about, in terms of the cultural kind of relevance and knowledge you have to have to understand them?

Absolutely, that's a great one, same thing with lol cats or any of the other common memes that you see, the Karen meme right? Like now, you know what a Karen meme is because you've seen it so many times and you've seen it used in lots of different instances, but you may not have known, right? If you were someone from 2000 looking at a Karen meme today, you'd be like what is the Karen meme? What is this? So you definitely need the cultural significance to sort of inform your own understanding of what a meme is and how it functions in society.

And you've been a meme curator of sorts this last year, specifically of the Karen memes. Can you tell us some of your favorite ones that you found last year and what incidents they were referencing?

Yeah, there are so many, so thanks to my friend, Austin Myers from AK5A, I wanted to definitely give him a shout out for collecting all these names for me, in this specific subset, I believe I have around 60,000 that I'm analyzing and looking at different tweets, related to these memes, there are 15 different incidents. So barbecue Becky, permit Patty, full patrol Paula, Walmart Mary, right? There's so many different ones and each of them sounds sort of funny, right? Like they give us a laugh or a chuckle and that's sort of how I first got into it. I was like, oh look at this another White person doing a thing they shouldn't be doing and now they're paying for it, by having their face blow up, all over the internet right? But definitely I think my favorite is barbecue Becky, because she's sort of spawned this meme genre and a little bit of the background, we actually saw barbecue Becky in the clip that you showed, she is Jennifer Schulte, the woman who was on the phone calling the police on the Black family, in Oakland about the charcoals and how these charcoals are so harmful, they might burn some kids and then us taxpayers are going to have to pay for those medical bills, right? Like that is when she's saying her concern is rooted in and it's just so far fetched that that's even a concern. And one of my favorite things that I like to do when I start to talk about this in my classes, I show the actual 911 video call where she is saying she's describing in really clear detail exactly what these Black men look like, what they're wearing and then

all of a sudden when the 911 dispatcher asks her about what she's wearing and what she looks like, she says, "It doesn't matter". I'm like how interesting that it matters that they're Black but it doesn't matter what you look like and it doesn't matter that you are White and you can hear the 911 dispatcher asking her, "Are you White? "Are you Black?" And she really is sort of resistant to talking about her race because she doesn't want it to be about her as a White woman, but she does want it to be about these men as Black men, right? And so I'd have to say that one's my favorite, just because of the wide variety of memes and the different situations in which we find BBQ Becky, The View show, the one of her calling on Barack Obama, that's one of my favorites. There's also a Jefferson's one where she's looking through their window and she's saying "They finally got a piece of the pie" and she's upset about that, so yeah, those are some of my favorites.

And that specific incident really spawned a meme within a meme, can you talk a little bit about, the then large barbecue that ensued after that call?

Yeah, so actually in sort of celebration of this resistance, people in Oakland had a barbecue in the same spot the next year and I believe the year after, I believe it was intended to be an annual tradition, where people had a big cookout in response to this White woman trying to surveil and patrol, honestly, right? The whole idea was that she did not want these Black people in this particular public space, which we should note is a historically Black public space. And so if we're thinking about gentrification and all of the politics there and what's happening, as these traditionally Black spaces are becoming gentrified and why people are coming into these spaces it's really interesting that White women want to then assert their power and assert who was allowed in public spaces, which are not even theirs to begin with.

Why do you think that's such an important practice to people who practice Karen-ism if you will, why is it necessary to police the movements of Black men, women, and children in this way?

What have you found?

Yeah, that is the question, right? I think that's what we're sort of all picking at and digging out. Why is there this compulsion, right? As I talk about it with my friends and we talk about Karen's often, right? Because we encounter them in our daily lives and I think that's something that's important to acknowledge too. You know, not every incident is recorded, but often as Black women or as Black people we experienced Karen's on an everyday basis and it's that's very real for us, which is why it's so easy to see this meme and recognize it and see yourself in it. And so I often think about why White women and in the words of my friends can't mind their own business, right? Why can't White women just mind their own business? And the truth of it is, surveilling and patrolling and policing Black people is their business and that is the problem. The whole idea, if we think back to how White women were complicit in slavery, especially and Stephanie Jones-Rogers has a new book out, "They were her Property". That does a really great job of talking about this myth that we believe that White women did not take part in slavery that they were sort of these, they stood by and they were aware, but they weren't actually complicit. They didn't own slaves and that's just not true, because they did, lots of historical records show that and in that way they benefited from the dehumanizing of Black people and then when slavery was dissolved, White women and White people as a whole, certainly benefited from maintaining the power differential even though slavery was no longer in place, White people certainly still wanted to maintain the idea that Black people and people of color were less than. And so, even though we sort of like to believe that we are post-racial or that we've moved so far beyond the days of slavery, it's just not true. And ultimately, a lot of those same ideologies from the slave days, really underlie these same kinds of Karen practices. The idea that White people are superior and that there should be some natural order, or that Black people for some reason are just nefarious, right? They're born bad and so they deserve to be patrolled and of course, another piece of it is that, White people are socialized to believe that Black people are dangerous. That's a message that comes through in media and if you consume enough of that then you start to buy into this idea that Black bodies are a threat to oneself, right? Even if they're just walking casually by, all of a sudden or not all of a sudden because it's years of acculturation, right? But that process tells you, oh I'm in danger, right? And that sort of like fight or flight response kicks in and I think White women are compelled to perform this fear, this racial fear in a way.

Wow, that word you just use perform is just it really hearkens back to last summer when we saw the footage of Amy Cooper in the park and the performance that was given, of what she was attempting to depict as imminent danger and it really I don't know why it startled me but it did, It's still with everything that we study, startled me to my core that someone would weaponize, their own identity in that way. And to me, I want to know how do memes attempt to call out that action, but gives space for people to really fully know what it is that they're doing? Because I think I asked that question because Christian Cooper who made the film said "I don't think I need to do anything else. "The videos out there, let's just let it go. "We need to leave space for her to be rehabilitated". And those kinds of things, how do memes function in that way? Are they meant to just call out and leave it there? Are they meant to organize dialogue? What is their true function if not punishment?

Yeah, so I think Christian Cooper's case is very interesting. And I just want to put it out there that I believe everybody who's Black has their own way of doing Blackness and I believe in the agency of Black people. So Christian Cooper didn't want to take it any further great for Christian Cooper, but I am here to take it all the way further, right? Because I don't have any grace for Central Park Karen or Amy Cooper because we could clearly see that it was a performance, right? This man is standing six feet away from her at least because we're in the middle of a pandemic, so he already, I'm sure didn't want to get close to her. And she's saying this Black man is attacking me right? And it really hearkens back to, the Emmett Till story where the woman is saying, "Oh this Black man is threatening me. "Oh, this Black man was sexually offensive towards me" Right? And though Amy Cooper, Central park Karen is not using the language of sexuality, a lot of the fear that we have of Black men is, the same hold over from the slave days where Black men were portrayed as being hyper-sexual, brutish, scary rapists, right? And we know that that's not true but that's the myth that gets perpetuated. And so when White women then perform that racialized fear, it's really retelling that same narrative of Black men as this animalistic brutish, scary figure that I now need to call in the police on, to come and regulate this Black man's body. Right? And so the memes then do so many things, right? Like we really owe a big debt, to the people who are creating these memes, because they're doing so much work for us, they're calling

attention to the actions of White women on the surface. They are helping us have this dialogue about casual racism or seemingly casual racism, right? Because it's not actually casual, but it appears to be when it happens on camera and we can sort of laugh about it. And they also call for restitution, they're saying, it's not okay for you to do this, we're not going to tolerate it. And often when people tweet about memes, they're saying this is this person's picture, we should get her fired, right? People are out for blood. They are not just sitting around laughing about it, they're also saying this is where she works. call her boss and demand that they fire her, because this is how she's treating people. And in so many of these cases we have seen that come to fruition. In fact, Amy Cooper did I believe lose her job and same thing with permit Patty, who is the one in San Francisco who was calling the police on the Black child for selling water bottles. She was a CEO of a cannabis company and she resigned, so we are actually seeing memes do this work of calling White women to account for their actions and not just simply surveil Black people and put them in harm's way and walk away unscathed.

And I want to delve a little bit deeper if I can too, into identity, because although we've been saying that Karen-ism is a practice that's really leveraged and wielded by White women, there are White passing women or women who aspire to Whiteness who are also guilty of this behavior. So I want to step away from White women specifically and talk about what are some ways that you've seen maybe Asian women or Latinx women engage in this same behavior, if you will?

Right, I think just recently there was an incident, right? With a White passing Latinx woman calling the police on someone and then her sort of having this moment of clap back with, I believe it was Joy Reed, I could be wrong, I think that's who it was with. Definitely, it's not just White women and I think the interesting thing about that is that these people who were sort of White adjacent as I like to call them are performing Whiteness, because it does communicate a form of social power. It extends their power, right? And I think that there's this desire to distance from being a person of color, or distance from Blackness in particular, right? Where Blackness and Black people are subjugated as sort of like the lowest rung on the social ladder, which again is a myth that we tell, but it's a myth that is prominent and that people believe in and so in that way, it sort of becomes reality and so we see other women, not just White women also

participating in Karen-ism or being a Karen, right? Partaking in that entitlement and the patrolling and profiling and surveilling of Black people.

Well, and how do you theoretically kind of anchor all of your work Apryl? 'Cause I know that when you talk about these kinds of things obviously people are going to get really defensive. If they see themselves in this kind of practice, or maybe engaged in it and don't want to admit it, or it's a knee jerk reaction for some people and it can be difficult to break a pattern of doing that. And your work can summon up in a lot of people those feelings of, oh my goodness, is this me? Am I doing this? And in being that mirror for people how do you intellectually anchor what you're doing with surveillance, scholarship? Like what bodies of literature do you tap into most often?

Yeah, so first I definitely want to say that if people are having a moment where they're like Oh my gosh, is that me? That's good. You should be having a moment where you're thinking, am I a Karen is what I'm doing, would that be attributed as a Karen activity? Should I be calling the police on my neighbor? Or should I be following this Black person around the store? If you feel that someone might think you're a Karen, you should probably stop and think a little bit more about why that might be, right? But, so I do definitely want to get back to your main question, which is this idea of the literature. So Simone Browne did groundbreaking work in terms of, talking about surveillance and this idea that Blackness is a site of surveillance, right? The whole idea is that not just individuals but also at the state level and all of these new surveillance technologies that are coming out, really focus on Blackness as a key identifier and a key marker of difference of otherness and a reason to surveil and patrol, right? And there are so many studies that we could talk about, where these technologies ultimately fail because they actually weren't built to surveil us in particular right? Which is kind of a good thing, something I've been talking about with my graduate students is like the power and the glitches as Ruha Benjamin writes in her book, where we might be thankful that these technologies don't work. We don't want to be visible in some senses and there's sort of this tension where we do want to be visible, but also we don't always want to be patrolled and surveilled in this way. And of course, even though Foucault is definitely not without problems, right? I recognize that Foucault is not just a universal hero, there's certainly his work resonates for me in that idea of the surveillance state, right? or the

surveillance society, we live in this panoptic society for everyone, but then that effect is sort of really doubled down on Black people and public spaces in particular, where because they are other, because they stand out, they then are part of this all consuming, always ongoing surveillance and the thing about Foucault's panopticon is that, when you are surveilled so heavily all the time you start to behave as though you're always being watched. Even if you aren't, you start to regulate your own behavior, and in that way, if Black people are always regulating our movements and thinking about our safety, we can't really be free if we're constantly constrained by this anxiety of, am I being watched? Are White people going to call the police on me? Is my life at harm just for taking a stroll around the block?

So there's a real somatic concern too in terms of how our body's take in that stress and process just the very act of doing ordinary things and possibly being punished for them, wow. Is there any other research that you'd like to tap into? I'm specifically thinking about Bell Hook's work, and her notion of this oppositional gaze. Can you talk a little bit about how Black people are glaring back through these memes?

Absolutely, yeah, thank you, that's a great point. Certainly the memes serve as a counter-surveillance right? On the one hand, we have White women trying to surveil and regulate our bodies in public spaces, but the memes do the exact same work for them right? They actually hold up this mirror and say, okay just like you are patrolling us, we're actually going to patrol you and we're not going to continue to allow you to really harass and terrorize our communities in the way that you have been. And there certainly is this production of a counter-narrative that says, what you're doing is not just casual racism, it's actually harmful and actually should be punishable, right? Or should be punished, this is not something that you can do, right? It's like if I were to talk to BBQ Becky, no, actually you're the one who's wasting taxpayer resources by having the police come out and search for a random White lady because you won't tell us what you're wearing and you're at a park full of people, right? So really it's flipping this conversation.

Wow and one of the other things I'm thinking about too when you mentioned her being like this open space I think so much of these recent images that we saw January six of

the Capitol siege and there weren't just men there, right? There were women on the front lines as well barging into offices, stealing laptops. Can you talk a little bit about how White supremacy has been maintained or upheld by women? Because I think so much of what we talk about especially in context with police brutality, deals with what White men tend to engage in, in the police forces, in the ranks of slavery and things like that. But for so many people White women and White womanhood has been invisible in that discussion, but for me, it was very visible in the sense that a lot of the women, even one of the casualties was a woman. Can you talk a little bit about how this modern fight against White supremacy will involve, really calling that behavior out more often and how we can call other feminists into this fight? Who may not think that, that's a discussion that needs to be had?

Yeah, absolutely, such a good set up, you and I talked about this a few weeks ago this idea that White women were complicit so much so, in the attack on the Capitol and it really makes me think about Jennifer Pierce's "Racing for Innocence". She does this ethnography with lawyers and she interviewed several women lawyers and wives of lawyers at a predominantly male firm and the chapter I'm thinking of is called Stand by your Man and it's this idea that White women are standing by their men to support them and not just to support them, but ultimately to uphold their idea of patriarchy, right? Which then the thing is that White feminism, or mainstream feminism, often though it seeks to resist the patriarchy, in not acknowledging how White patriarchy burdens Black and Brown women ultimately reinforces and upholds the patriarchy. That's the irony of it and Jessie Daniels writes about this in her forthcoming book, really White women are invested in the patriarchy and maintaining it's like the patriarchal order as it exists, because it protects them and it protects their Whiteness and their role in society as White women. Traditionally in American society, we have this idea that White women are pure, that they can do no wrong, right? Like they are the nurturers of our society. They teach values, they represent all of this mythological, ideologies about womanhood and motherhood and nurturance. And what we saw in the Capitol is that sort of, acting on this idea that we're true American Patriots, our idea, our ideology, our ethos, is that when something is being wrong, we need to step in. And there's clearly been a wrong committed here which we know is not true, but they believe that there was a wrong committed here worth defending. And so for these women, I feel as though they were

sort of saying, okay I need to uphold these ideas, these norms, these values that we as Americans hold dear, because if I won't do it, no one else will, right? And so I think that that's sort of the danger there and this whole idea of White entitlement, is that they feel that they can, I'm not sure of any other groups who in our society would feel as comfortable doing that, right? Would feel I can do this and I can get away with it And as something about Whiteness and the power that whiteness has been afforded for centuries in our country that says, I have the power and I can do this thing with impunity. And unfortunately we're seeing in a lot of cases, that that is the case.

And a lot of what you're saying too, goes back to this underlying concept of the meme being a vehicle to express this ongoing rage, this ongoing saga of lying on Black people in many cases, or reporting things that seem frivolous and everyday, but could be deadly to us, underneath the guise of this almost comic like, or editorial cartoon brought to life. But these memes have real consequences can you talk a little bit about, the legislature that's been spawned by a lot of these memes?

Yeah, absolutely. So there is a new Caren Act it's spelled with a C, so it stands for caution against racially exploitative non-emergencies which would make it illegal or which would make it a hate crime to call the police for a racially exploitative, non-emergency right? So this is in California where they are trying to get this on the books, but there are several other states Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Washington, where legislatures are working to try to create policies around Karen behavior or Karen calls to the police. And I actually interviewed representative Janelle Bynum, who is in the Oregon State House and she sort of talked to me about how she was able to pass this law and to my knowledge, this was the first one that was passed. And she said, basically that she did it very quietly, she didn't make a huge fuss about it, because she was afraid to attract white supremacist attention, right? Like attract people who would be afraid of this and it's important to note that the reason why she came up with this law is because of her own experience of being racially profiled. As she was campaigning for re-election a white woman called the police on her and this was on national news, of course And so this was very personal for her in terms of making sure that these kinds of calls were not taken lightly and also she specifically talked about the idea that the memes really gave her the power to do it, as she saw that it wasn't just

something that was happening to her. Cause she sort of had this feeling which we sort of all do when we have these moments, right? You're sort of like, oh this white woman just followed me around the neighborhood, is it in my head? Is it just me? But the memes do, the power of the memes is that they connect the dots for people. They make it really easy to see that there's a pattern right? It's not just this one instance happening to Janelle Bynum, it's not just Amy Cooper, or Central Park Karen, but all of these incidences or instances have a pattern of behavior of white entitlement, which encouraged her to pass these laws. And I really think that the memes are contributing to the conversation and encouraging other lawmakers to write policy, that protects Black people and allows us to be more free and to actually live without fear of being attacked by the police for any given, taking a breath, right? Walking around the corner.

Wow, I think this has been a great conversation, I want to go to some questions now because we have a couple that are coming through the Q and A chat, let's see, Mariana says, "hi everyone, I'm Brazilian "here the memes machine is on fire for years. "We do realize that humor is a very important thing "to relieve oppression, "but as you two speak, I realized that the use of memes "as a weapon for Black people, doesn't that contribute "and make the problem look more superficial?". How do you answer that Apryl?

Yeah, so I think that it can definitely make the problems seem superficial, but as long as we're having conversations like the ones that we're having now and the conversations that lawmakers are having, I think we can sort of point people in the direction of, okay, we can laugh at it and the memes are sort of like doing this work of providing a form of catharsis, but it's really ultimately having us have these larger more prominent and visual conversations, about the works that memes do and also help us to keep track of that counter surveillance right? And sort of calling people to account for their actions. So I don't think that they do more harm than good to answer the question.

Okay, Rachel asks "How would you relate this back to "James Baldwin's arguments, "that race is a white person's problem, "not people of colors?

Yes, snaps Rachel, absolutely, I 100% agree, race is a white person's problem, right? And Black people and especially Black women have been doing the labor of trying to help people unlearn the racism that they built, right? Race was created as a myth to make it okay for the racialized violence and terror that white people were committing, right? They sort of had to circulate this idea that we were less than that we were other and so that's their problem, right? But the problem is also that it impacts us and so we're sort of tied in with this fight because for us it's a fight for Liberty right? The fight for life in some cases, but ultimately race is white people's problem and we really need white people to take up their own burden of undoing this violence and both symbolically and figuratively that they've committed over the past several centuries, right? And that needs to look a little bit more active and I think that we're sort of starting to see that but also it seems like we take one step forward two steps back at times. So I don't really know what to do with that tension.

I'm glad you mentioned the tension, what do you do with people who say things, for example like Karen is a slur, like that's the first I think backlash that I saw to this whole movement to call out this behavior. Is it a slur? What do you consider it?

Yeah, so I don't think of it as a slur at all, I really just see it as shorthand for white entitlement. For me, that's ultimately what it is, there have certainly been communities that have taken it out of context and again, that for me is a white person problem, right? Because they are coming away from the original way that Black people intended it to be. So if white people are taking it out of context and using it for other things, right? Like I know that white men have started calling white feminist Karens, which is a completely sort of like maladaptation of the way that the term was intended to be used and that's a white person problem. I don't feel the need to sort of like help people work through why Karen is not a slur. Black people are not trying to say all Karen's are bad, but we're saying that this particular set of behavior is associated with white entitlement and sort of like the desire to regulate and maintain white supremacy is bad and again, that's a white people problem.

Okay, Neil has a great question here, he asks, "I love the idea of Foucault's panopticon "and it reminds me of a time when I was stopped "by the police in my apartment building

"because there was a suspicious" he has in quotes "Black man on the premises, but I'm a wheelchair user. "And I was the only one in the building who lived there. "I'm interested in this intersection "of disability and Blackness with surveillance. "And so I'm wondering if you have thoughts "about Black people whose bodies defy invisibility "and how we're supposed to convert constant attention "into a space of peace?"

That's a heavy one and I don't want to take that sort of lightly. And I really, your the piece about taking it into a space of peace, really resonates with me, especially in Black History month, because I think so often Black History Month can be about pain and remembering our collective trauma. And I think it should be about that in some ways, but it also has to be about our collective healing and moving forward. Otherwise it's just not healthy, right? And it's just not the case that we are not able to thrive. We are thriving despite all of these things and despite all of the ways that white people are trying to limit our agency and limit our power and limit our joy, we're still managing to have those things. And I don't know necessarily what that should look like for everyone, but I'm sort of thinking through, again, this tension of like what it means for us to be visible and at times want to not be visible, right? Like I would imagine being a Black wheelchair user, in your community there may be times when you maybe don't want to be seen, right? And that it's hard to manage what that looks like, that tension of, I want to be seen as fully human, just like everyone else here, but I don't want to be surveilled and made to feel like I don't belong. So I'm not sure that was a really an answer, more just a response.

No, it was a great answer because it made me think a lot about my time living in my hometown of Washington DC which was when I was there 60% Black and I felt at many times a positive invisibility because a lot of people look like me, so I was just at ease, I was comfortable, moving out here to California however, where I think it's about 6% Black where I live, I'm constantly hypervigilant and can feel it in my body how a room shifts when I walk into it in terms of, people just looking to see what I'm going to do whether it's a Target, a nail shop, all those kinds of places where I'm thinking what's the big deal? And I realized, oh that's what it is and so I think that this kind of consciousness this double consciousness if you will, to call out Du Bois and his Harvard connection, is something that we do carry in our body. So I'm glad that Neil brought that up, that the

duality of being at once invisible, but visible very hyper-visible in other instances, is a constant shifting and recalibrating of oneself in a way that can be exhausting, so I'm glad that he brought that up. Okay, another great question that we have here from Alyssa is "I'm curious if you could speak about "the white mainstreaming of memes, "which originate from Black people and Black culture "when white people start co-opting or sharing "and creating Karen memes what happens to the meme? "Similarly, I'm super curious from your perspective "on TikTok, where memes that use Black audio are often used "by white teenagers and white teens often benefit more "in terms of virality from the use of those audios "than the Black creators".

Yeah, let's have a conversation about cultural appropriation, right? And not just appropriation, but also exploitation, especially when thinking about TikTok, I have been thinking this whole year about responsible ways to study TikTok, so if people have them and want to link up, please message me, I would love to hear from you. And I want to look at exactly this, how is it the case that these Black content creators are producing all of these sounds and all of these all this good visual information and audio information and entertainment, but seem to never get credit for it, right? And I feel like every time I open TikTok, a Black content creator is saying "Someone stole my sound", right? And it's sort of this idea of digital blackface where people are performing Blackness because it's cool, right? It goes back to that old idea that like everybody wants to be Black and so you have to actually be Black, right? And then no one wants to be Black when you actually have to suffer the consequences, but everyone wants the good things, the positive experiences, the culture, the food the music, all of those things, right? And so there's sort of this exploitation this use of our images, our likeness, our voices without actually attributing anything to us, or paying us for those contributions.

Wow, yeah and Anna asks something that's kind of along those lines in terms of hyper-vigilance and surveillance and also giving credit where credit is due. Because I think so much of this calling out culture, we don't give enough credit even to the LGBTQ community for starting us off, all of the language that we use online, "yas, queen," all of those things are very gay things to say, right? And things that the gay community has given us and it's just used and bandied about in ways that aren't even credited to ballroom culture at all. Aren't credited to the people who created that language, shade,

all of those words are words that are used in those communities and then were co-opted and watered down in ways that I don't even recognize in many cases. And Anna asks along those lines, she says "Apryl your comments about white complicity on the sixth "make me think about how white womanhood is so complicit "in transphobia as well, in your research "have you noticed any threads "around intersectional trans issues?"

Yeah, absolutely. There's a paper I'm thinking of and of course I can't think of the author or the name right now, but if you email me Anna, I will try to find it, where they talk about ability specifically and how it sort of intersects with trans rights issues and I think that there are a lot of parallels there and especially if we're thinking about the way that like going back to this idea of queer culture and queer ballroom culture, which again, yes, started by queer people, but started by queer Black people in particular, so again, it's like this pulling away and taking and stripping away from Black people, Black creators. And it's the same thing with these trans ideologies and these ideas about ability, which really help everyone, right? If the whole idea is that people should be respected, no matter of like how they identify, or what their body looks like or how their body is normative or non-normative quote unquote, then that benefits everyone not just people in those bodies. And I think that's something that we often come away from and people get excited about these languages and these ideas because they are beneficial, but then we need to always remember to credit and sort of give back to and interact with, those communities instead of just taking away from.

Great, okay I think we have time for about two more questions. I'm going to go with Roslyn Satchel and Jenny Korn. Rosalyn asks "Recognizing the ways in which "activist communities are being targeted "via police surveillance technology, "that this is the outgrowth "of the history of racial terror of which you speak, "what can be done in terms of technology, policy "and practice to combat the violence "used by law enforcement? "Many scholars are deconstructing the problems, "but do you think that tech has the potential "to help activists fight back?"

Yeah, absolutely. I feel like there's so many examples where we are already seeing activists fighting back against tech, whether that is, I think it's called V G jab, I'm not

even saying it right. V dazzle which I also feel it sounds like something else too, but talking about when people paint their faces before they go to protest, right? And so that they cannot be picked up by cameras, because we can see that people are using technology to pick out faces, Black faces that are at these protests and then penalize them. But the thing that I think is interesting is that now we're using that same technology, especially Black technologists are calling for that same technology to be used on the Capitol insurgency. Right? So if you can use that technology on us at BLM protests, then you can definitely use that technology on these actual domestic terrorists, right? Like that is an actual appropriate use of this technology, not on BLM protestors who are protesting peacefully down the city block, right? And not chanting like "death to Mike Pence," right? There's a completely different thing, and I think points to sort of like this appropriate use of these kinds of technologies and there are so many opportunities for Black technologists and Black policymakers to think about, how these technologies can be used to better Black communities instead of harming them. But ultimately we need to make sure that we're actually centering the communities that we're trying to protect, instead of just thinking about them, instead of being in conversation with them.

That's great and I have a two-part question I would say, that we'll piggyback on that. Jenny wants to know if there are failed memes, 'cause we've only talked about successful ones. Are there any failed means that did not work because they pushed the envelope too far or just weren't funny? And Nickeel wants to know as, as someone who identifies as Asian American, what should be Asian-American's role specifically as being complicit in the violence of developing big tech surveillance at companies like Palantir and Amazon, he wants to know what he can personally do. So are there failed memes? Is there stuff that didn't work and what can the tech industry do specifically? He's asking about Asian-Americans

Right, okay so I'm going to go with failed memes first. I'm sure there are, I can't think of any, but I'm not going to say no, because I'm sure there are some that just don't work that are maybe too scary to be funny. So I'm going to just leave that at that and if there are like, I would love to know what some of the failed ones look like. There's certainly some that don't gain as much traction and I think when these events happen too close together, one of them can sort of overshadow the other. I saw that happen a lot where

some incidents just wouldn't get as much play, because they came right on the end of another one and people were already so deeply engrossed in conversation about the proceeding event. So for the question about Asians and this complicity, I appreciate this question a lot because it goes back to the conversation we were having earlier where we're sort of thinking about the ways that Asian women are complicit, right? And I think this myth of the model minority is really damaging, because Americans typically think of Asians as being white adjacent right? Like, no, they're not white, but they have a lot of the privileges of whiteness, because they're seen as the good minority, the high achieving, high performing, non-threatening minority, unlike Black and brown people. And so I think the first step really is just to recognize that and I know that there is already so much work out there that's acknowledging how Asians are complicit in racism in just the same way that race as a white people problem. I think it has to sort of become it has to be everyone's problem, right? Like Asian people also have to think about how their complicity, especially as designers, right? Where we take for granted some of the programming languages or the things that go into code, really it falls on each individual person to say, oh we should take a step back and think about the things that we're putting in here or to question the norms of a company or the norms of a coding schema, right? Like whatever that looks like, so thank you so much for that question.

Thank you Apryl. As we wrap, can you tell us how to keep in touch with you? What are the best ways Dr. Williams that you like to continue conversations and what new projects should we be looking out for?

Yeah, definitely, thank you, Allissa. So please do feel free to email me at aprilw@umich.edu. I am slow to respond to emails. So if you email me and I don't respond, please ping me again. I'm not ignoring you. I'm just overwhelmed and so also you can message me on Twitter. I see those pretty quickly for more informal exchanges and so right now I'm working on a few different things, but my biggest thing is my book project on online dating. I'm working with some colleagues at Northeastern University and we're sort of looking at different trends on Tinder and I've done some interviews with people on Bumble and looking at the racialized dating experience. So hopefully that

will be coming out in book form very, very, very soon. And I think that's all for now, since we're running out of time.

Thank you so much for joining us, everyone. You've been a great audiences, these been fantastic questions and thank you again to the Berkman Center for hosting this fabulous event and happy Black History Month, everyone.

Yes, thank you. Happy Black History Month.