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What's Your Emergency?: White Women and the Policing of Public Space

ON TUESDAY, MAY 29, 2018, Starbucks closed eight thousand stores so that its nearly one hundred seventy-five thousand employees could undergo racial bias training. The company scheduled the training after a Philadelphia store manager, a white woman with a history of calling the police on black customers, called 9-1-1 on Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson. The arrest sparked outrage when video of the incident was posted on social media (Melissa DePino, a customer in the coffee house at the time, filmed the arrest and posted the video to Twitter where it was shared four million times in forty-eight hours). Although different from the types of police encounters that have dominated news reports — encounters that often end in the murder of black people — this episode, and the many others like it that have come to light in the months since, is equally important to understanding contemporary race relations in the United States. Here and in other incidents in which white people, especially white women, make false reports to the police accusing black people of criminal activity where none is present, gender often plays a pivotal role in producing notions of fear and safety. In this essay, I am most interested in how discourses of security and rights enable and subliminate racism, encouraging white women to call the police on black people. The implications of such acts are magnified in a context where police encounters often end in the violent death of innocent “suspects.”

I also want to consider the unique response engendered by social media, in which accusers are lampooned and turned into memes.

In the time since Nelson and Robinson were arrested, numerous other incidents in which police were called on innocent black people have been reported in the press. Although recounting all of these incidents would be impossible — especially because we might imagine that each story that garners media attention eclipses countless others that do not — a few examples reveal a compelling set of consistencies. At Yale University and more recently at Smith College, white female students called police on black students who were using common areas to study or sleep. A white woman called the police on Kelly Fyffe-Marshall, Donisha Prendergast, and Komi-Oluwa Olafimihan as they moved out of their Airbnb, and former Obama-administration staffer Darren Marten was questioned by police while he moved into his apartment in New York City. In Pennsylvania, a white man called the police on five black women while they golfed. His complaint: the women were playing too slowly.¹ A woman in Oakland called the police on two black men who were barbecuing in a public park in Lake Merritt. This incident was also filmed and posted to the internet where it went viral, with viewers dubbing the woman #BBQBecky. Her image was also digitally edited so that she appears standing behind Martin Luther King on the steps of

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1. See Cleve R. Wootson, Jr., “A Black Yale Student Fell Asleep in Her Dorm’s Common Room. A White Student Called Police,” *The Washington Post*, May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/05/10/a-black-yale-student-fell-asleep-in-her-dorms-common-room-a-white-student-called-police/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e7cac4497128; “All I Did Was Be Black’: Someone Called the Police on a Student Lying on a Dorm Couch,” *The Washington Post*, August 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/08/05/all-i-did-was-be-black-someone-called-the-police-on-a-student-lying-on-a-dorm-couch/?utm_term=.dof1afbe4e75; Patricia Mesachio, “Bob Marley’s Granddaughter Donisha Prendergast Demands Police Protocol Changes After Airbnb Run-In,” *Billboard*, May 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/8455886/bob-marley-granddaughter-donisha-prendergast-airbnb>; Julica Jacobo and Erica Y King, “Profiling Is Real: Former Obama Staffer Mistaken as Burglar While Moving into New York City Apartment,” *ABC News*, May 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/profiling-real-obama-staffer-mistaken-burglar-moving-york/story?id=54877597>; Christina Caron, “5 Black Women Were Told to Golf Faster. Then the Club Called the Police,” *The New York Times*, April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/black-women-golfers-york.html>.

the Lincoln Memorial, peering through the window of the Oval Office at President Obama taking a phone call, and popping up in Wakanda.² More recently, a woman in San Francisco nicknamed #PermitPatty was recorded making a 9-1-1 call to report an eight-year-old black girl for selling water. She complained that the girl did not have a permit. The list is alarmingly long. Indeed, from California to New York, from gyms to parks, from department stores to universities, it feels like it is open season on black people.

I want to linger over #PermitPatty and #BBQBecky, two figures who have risen to iconic status. “Becky” and “Patty,” whose real names are Jennifer Schulte and Allison Ettel respectively, typified the kind of racism that saturated the false reports listed above. They were also unique in that they enabled a humoristic stance in the response from black critics. These women achieved the status of internet infamy, becoming cartoon caricatures of a mode of white femininity obsessed with eliminating black people from public space in the name of rule-following.³ In this, they typify the “exceptional citizen[-ship]” that Inderpal Grewal describes in *Saving the Security State*. In fact, they exemplify “exceptional citizens”’ desires “to access and maintain the privileges of whiteness to become exceptional and sovereign.”⁴ As Grewal notes, women play a unique role in the machinations of exceptional citizenship, fusing a race-blind regard for equal opportunity with the ambitions of a white-supremacist security state. While this may be true for the many women who work in the defense and intelligence sectors, as Grewal describes, other noncredentialed women living in American cities during this age of “white return” also seek to express their desire for police power through the emergency calls they make to police. To my eye, Becky and Patty advance the agenda of US empire in the gentrifying neighborhoods

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2. See Malinda Janay, “These Hysterical Memes of the Becky Who Hates Black Barbecues Deserve Some Kind of Twitter Award,” Blavity, May 2018, <https://blavity.com/these-hysterical-memes-of-the-becky-who-hates-black-barbecues-deserve-some-kind-of-twitter-award>.
 3. In Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), Fiona, the white Irish maid, evokes the same sensibility. Fiona reports the white family protecting the escaped slave Cora, ostensibly to raise her own social position.
 4. Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

of America's inner cities.⁵ That is, the general and pervasive specter of black criminality underwrites Becky's and Patty's fears and makes their calls to police appear reasonable and fair-minded. It leaves some, myself included, asking "what's your emergency?"

In the course of their responses to critics, both in the moment and after the fact, they reject the notion that blackness contributed to their decisions to call the police in any way. Indeed, both attempted to explain their antiblackness through the language of the public good, language that ultimately invokes the rule of law as its justification. In so doing, they frame racialized conceptions of safety and risk in supposedly colorblind terms. In Becky and Patty, we see the true contour of securitized femininity in the contemporary moment. See-something-say-something logic enshrouds white women like Becky and Patty in a purportedly colorblind veil of rule following, enabling them to carry out the work of white supremacy by insisting that black people are always already worthy of suspicion. Their problem, as they themselves claim, is with their victims' disregard for the regulations governing the use of public space — barbequing in a zone where children might get hurt or selling water bottles on a hot day without a permit. They justify their emergency calls through what I would term prophetic mental gymnastics foreseeing their own victimization or, notably, the victimization of (white) children. (In Patty's case, the victimization of Jordan Rodgers, the eight-year-old girl on whom she called the police, seems not to have concerned her). In short, Becky and Patty purport to act in the public's best interest, ensuring the preservation of a pristine, and implicitly white, public order predicated on the oppression of black people.

The orderly world Becky and Patty seek in their recourse to regulations is saturated with white claims to public space. The ties between race, property, and rights have long been a central object of inquiry for critical race theorists, especially for black feminist critics of the law. As Cheryl Harris explains in her foundational 1993 article "Whiteness as Property,"

5. Both Michelle Alexander and Elizabeth K. Hinton describe the growth of domestic security regimes that developed out of the War on Drugs. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); and Elizabeth K. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

“In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect.”⁶ For Harris, it is almost impossible to disentangle notions of property and ownership from the legacy of racial domination that preconditioned their existence. Through various legal mechanisms, notably the sexual abuse of black women, “Whiteness became the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings.”⁷ Similar forces, she notes, allowed for the legal dispossession and removal of native peoples from land they had inhabited for generations. Together, these two capacities invested whiteness with the essential characteristics of property and disallowed black and native people from enjoying the privileges conferred by property rights. Read with this theory in mind and with an eye toward contributions to black feminist legal and social theory, from Patricia J. Williams’s crucial discussion of rights and need in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* to Jennifer C. Nash’s recent work on black female sexuality and waste, the policing of public space by white people, especially by caricatured white women, renders black people toxic, despoiling public property, and thus worthy of removal.⁸

The practice of policing public space has strong ties to the democratization of surveillance that has been a key feature of the War on Terror. Especially in contemporary cities, the fear of terrorism and crime deputizes everyday (white, female) citizens as surveillance officers. As scholars such as Grewal, Amy Kaplan, and Melani McAlister have shown, the language of “women’s rights” has produced the white female subject as a model citizen for right-less brown and black women in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. White women simultaneously bolster the imperial ambitions of Western powers, leading to dispossession and disenfranchisement of

6. Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1713.

7. *Ibid.*, 1721.

8. See Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Jennifer C. Nash, “Black Anality,” *GLQ* 20, no. 4 (2014): 439–60. Indeed the relationship of black people, especially black women, to legal categories of rights and rightlessness forms the foundations of black feminist legal theory. See also, Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1, art. 8 (1989).

the brown and black women who supposedly engender humanitarian concern. At home “security moms” serve the essential role of bolstering the state’s surveillance functions in the name of a tranquil *domestic*, a word that should register both the public nation and the private home.⁹ The see-something-say-something logic of the War on Terror/War on Drugs invites civilians to perform the surveillance functions of the state and ensures an endless war abroad. This logic has important implications when we consider that the practices of civilian policing, or vigilantism as it might (rightly) be identified in other contexts, began in the service of protecting white American women from black and native men. As Grewal notes, “In the period of Jim Crow, white women’s safety was used to justify the lynching or imprisonment of black men.”¹⁰ White women are thus understood as always already victimized and as perfectly pure and chaste. Vigilantism thus works in the service of preserving female purity and chastity while simultaneously exacting vengeance on the apparently corrupting forces of black presence. In the context of twenty-first-century US cities in the grip of white return and gentrification, this means removing black (and brown) people from the neighborhoods they were sequestered into in the era of white flight. White people who self-segregated out of urban centers, such as San Francisco, Oakland, or Philadelphia, seek the elimination of black people and culture from their parks, street corners, and doorsteps. They use the police as a private army, marshalled to cull those deemed undesirable from their neighborhoods. In short, they have declared open season on black people.

The recourse to law and order is subtler here than in the recent political rallies in Indiana and West Virginia. This is, therefore, not a partisan problem, but a problem of uninterrogated racism. For example, in her insipid mea culpa, Allison Etell describes Jordan Rodgers as “screaming” and “yelling” and claims that Rodgers disrupted Etell while she was working from home. Etell, we might imagine, was disrupted in the course of managing her online marijuana oil business, by the shouts

9. See Grewal, *Saving the Security State*, 118–43

10. *Ibid.*, 127. See also Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

of young girl trying to earn some money, like many other kids who sell lemonade and other iced beverages on hot days. Etell likely would have preferred the pigtailed-respectability of cul-de-sacs and hand-made signs to the hawking of cold water on an urban street. Etell's ludicrous request that her victim produce a permit overtly invokes the rule of law in order to justify her racism. In a world in which police interactions with black people — especially children — end in fatalities, emergency calls for innocuous violations may end in death. Perhaps activist Shaun King put it best when he tweeted the following in response to the video of Etell's 9-1-1 call: "They want police to kill us. The girl was causing no harm. They know what happens when they call the police. This is evil."¹¹

HUMOR IN RESPONSE TO "SPIRIT MURDER"

King's alarm is not misplaced. The seemingly banal cases in which white people use the public-serving police as a private security force reveal the insidious contours of whiteness (and, in these cases, white-womanhood) in the contemporary moment. It is, unfortunately, remarkable that these encounters ended without the kind of violence that claimed the lives of Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and too many others gunned down in the course of living their lives. Yet, because these encounters reflect a different kind of violence, violence that is closer to what Patricia Williams calls "spirit murder," there seems to be more room for creative protest.¹² Such protests have included the public outing of these figures, many of whom have lost jobs and friends because of their behavior. While I am concerned about the implications of sharing personal information about white victimizers (which uncomfortably evokes the tactics of misogynist white supremacist internet trolls), I want to consider the unique capacity of humor to combat this form of spirit murder.¹³ Social media, especially "black Twitter" — a loose association of black activists, culture-makers, intellectuals, and everyday figures — has enabled the comedic rejection of Becky, Patty, and others. The viral sharing of stories of public-space policing by white people, especially

11. Shaun King, Twitter post, June 23, 2018, 10:36 AM, <https://goo.gl/qhmXn5>.

12. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 73.

13. This practice, known as doxxing, has been widely used by antifeminist and racist internet denizens who use personal information to attack progressive public figures.

white women, enables the elaboration of extended networks of care-givers who share support and empower victims to recontextualize these events. The characterization of white women alarmists through a hashtag is especially interesting; the memification of Becky and Patty lays bare the one-dimensionality of their fears, while it also provides an outlet for what might otherwise be incapacitating feelings of anger and sadness. As Glenda Carpio suggests, humor, such as those memes lampooning Becky and Patty, “pillories the ideologies and practices that supported slavery, and that, in different incarnations, continue to support racist practices.”¹⁴ Becky’s inscription onto the image of the historic March on Washington, for example, juxtaposes the pervasive distaste for black people against the narrative of racial harmony following the Civil Rights Movement. Becky (and contemporary white supremacy by extension) appears as both a socio-cultural relic of a bygone racial order and an indicator of the recalcitrance of white supremacy despite the apparent victories of legal civil rights. Put differently, the object of humor—that is, the thing we object to as out-of-joint—is juxtaposed against its latent or implicit target. Becky’s opposition to racial progress becomes foregrounded, both metaphorically and positionally, when she is inscribed over the historic photo. Her disdain for black presence in public places cannot hide behind the veneer of public decency. She is a joke not only because her prejudice is incongruous with the narrative of racial progress (a narrative we should constantly question, to be sure), but also because of its diminutive stakes. Such a meme simultaneously signals the gravity of white women’s disdain and its fecklessness. Depictions of these figures as humorous memes highlight the absurdity of their behavior and, in so doing, bring the implicit assumptions of black criminality and white property and propriety to the fore. Despite the oppressive reality that any of these encounters might have ended more violently, sarcasm, hyperbole, caricature, and various other forms of ridicule bolster feelings of solidarity of black social media users and therefore complement other forms of public expression that enjoin people in their various acts of resistance. The hashtags #BBQBecky and #PermitPatty name the absurdity of suspicion that led to the encounter

14. Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

and suture that absurdity to a stereotypical white woman. They are rendered as cartoons, two-dimensional, and stock, simple in their animosity and opprobrium.

I conclude with a final incident, one that might, at first blush, appear distinct from what I have outlined above. In early June 2018, a Snapchat video depicting Tabitha Duncan and two white, male companions went viral. Duncan, a white waitress and US Air Force enlisted reservist from Missouri, and the two men are shown drinking beer on a dark country road. Duncan smiles at the camera as a male voice offscreen asks, "Are we going nigger hunting today or what?" "We're going nigger hunting," another man, this time on screen, replies. "You get them niggers," Duncan responds, smiling into the camera and sipping her beer.¹⁵ Duncan bolsters the predatory and potentially murderous intentions of her white male companions. She poses and grins, flirting with the camera and the men around her as they set out, ostensibly to find black men or women to insult, torment, assault, or kill. In this way, she exemplifies the feminized security figure that Grewal describes. It is easy to dismiss Duncan as extraneous rather than endogenous to the system of racism that produces Becky and Patty. Duncan's use of the taboo n-word, and its repetition in the discourse, suggests an easy acknowledgement of racism that Becky and Patty disavow. I would imagine that the latter would object to the use of such language in polite conversation. Yet, it is important to consider these two discrete forms of racism as linked in a shared project of seeking out, finding, and ultimately removing black people from white space. To me, these figures are cut from the same cloth. Duncan names the desire Becky and Patty have: to hunt black people, bring them to heel, to see them in chains or perhaps, worse, dead. Duncan, Becky, Patty, the Starbucks manager, and the Yale graduate student are all engaged in the current phase of "nigger hunting." With its roots in earlier modes of antiblack violence, contemporary pursuits are dominated by an explicit disavowal that race contributes at all to the desire to maintain an orderly world. Duncan's candid racism serves as

15. Although the video has been taken down, it can be seen on the Facebook page for Real STL News. See also Breanna Edwards, "Missouri Waitress Fired Over 'N-Word Hunting' Video Swears She Isn't Racist, Claims to Have Black Friends," *The Root*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.theroot.com/missouri-waitress-fired-after-n-word-hunting-video-swea-1826765082>.

an important indicator, showing us the hateful forces animating these desires. Truly evading the venatic ambitions of figures like Duncan, or Patty and Becky for that matter, may ultimately be impossible. Yet, the capacity of certain forms of social discourse to mock and cajole the forces of oppression shouldn't be overlooked or understated. Turning figures such as Betty, Patty, and maybe even Duncan, from poachers to punchlines is an important life-giving practice, one we should enthusiastically embrace.