

Cultural Daily

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Power Karens: Leveraging Networks to Torch Black History

Kathleen Antonia Tarr · Tuesday, August 3rd, 2021

“Everybody loves what you have to say until you have something to say about them.” ~ Trevor Noah

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Remember in 2018 when Kanye West asserted “[slavery was a choice](#)”? He justified his statement using Frederick Douglass as a counterexample, that “[Douglass’s] scheme for escaping to freedom was ridiculously easy. To escape from slavery, all Douglass had to do was board a train. That’s it: he just had to step on a train.” West compared Douglass to other enslaved people of the African diaspora saying that prior to his escape, Douglass was like them “an unknown slave, hoping to get through each day.” However according to West, *unlike* them, Douglass refused to simply thank God for his blessings and stay put. “Like them, he might have accepted his conditions and disappeared into the past, leaving the status quo unchanged. But he refused.”

It is absolutely appropriate that West be tasked for such a statement. To paint enslaved people with a brush that they wouldn’t be enslaved if they had just tried harder is like suggesting Jews imprisoned in concentration camps during the Holocaust and Japanese Americans interned/incarcerated during WW II were weak not to escape their circumstances. TMZ’s Van Lathan thought West’s whole *choosing slavery* thing was unreal.

... wait.

Okay, so Kanye West did indeed in 2018 say “slavery was a choice,” and Lathan did say to West about the remark, “[I am unbelievably hurt by the fact that you have morphed into something to me, that’s not real](#),” but the rest? The [rest](#) was penned in 2021 by renowned historian Heather Cox Richardson. Follower of her Facebook page, Rikki Honnold, commented on Richardson’s post, “there are enough gaffes in that I am going to have to unfollow.” Only Richardson wasn’t dragged in the media for her myopic, antiblack perspective. Instead, what should have been more vocal and widespread public criticism was kept at bay.

When I reached out to Richardson to express my horror and ask that she address disagreement and better, remedy the harms her characterizations cause, she replied that I should view her take “from the perspective of a person who has survived domestic abuse and is trying to find the courage to start again: the story of many of my readers.” She closed with, “I’m sorry to have angered you so,” I presume because Black women aren’t acknowledged in this society as feeling any other emotions, even when they (I) state explicitly that they are horrified. I shared her lens on her

Facebook page.

As one of her followers noted,

She did NOT acknowledge a single one of the valid criticisms directed by you and many of us at her post, and instead encouraged you to read it differently/better/through her own lens? Then defensively hiding behind (mostly white) women/her other readers, obviously more important than you, a black woman? I share your horror. “I am sorry to have angered you.” Wow. Both the angry black woman trope and the “I am sorry about your feelings but not about what I wrote” response. I am pretty stunned by this. Damn.

You won’t be able to review that comment, though, or properly credit it to the writer because Richardson’s moderators took it down and blocked me (I believe the comment was authored by Myléne Dressler but for obvious reasons can’t confirm). Richardson asserts that she does not monitor comments (“I don’t have time even to read them”), but after Vincent Lake reposted my concerns, Lake was blocked. Sherry “sjs” remarked, finding me on my own page once she saw that my comments were deleted: “I just read your comments about HCR (whom I love and respect) ... and am so upset and angry that she deleted your comment and thread... twice now! Why would she do that? These conversations are SO important to have!”

The answer to sjs’s question: Richardson is a Power Karen.

Jonathan Minchew-Gonzalez wrote,

I find it highly problematic that a post like this from such a high-profile writer seems to be above criticism. Especially when a BIPOC woman confronts things in it and is met with dismissive defensive comments and is labeled with a problematic stereotype. That’s not being an ally. Our privilege means we need to be responsible. We need to be responsible for what we say and do and it’s not a time to be defensive. Privilege of how our skin is seen in the world means that we have a responsibility to listen and be willing to change and not let our egos get in the way. Otherwise, any talking and writing we do about equality and justice is simply performative and ornamental.

Dr. Shirley Thompson also reached out to me in solidarity, appalled by Richardson’s response. As a historian herself, Dr. Thompson shared,

I found her misuse of the Douglass narrative infuriating. She disregarded his experience of enslavement to build a connection with her readers. In the process, she ignored the work of decades of historians. Her historical framing was a true throwback!

Nikole Hannah-Jones notes, “[The field of history has tended to downplay the role of slavery and](#)

racism in America and its institutions.” (at 33:07) The topic should therefore inspire scrutiny. Yet, more than 126,000 fans of Heather Cox Richardson celebrated her Douglass post without questioning it, that “blind allegiance” as Dr. Thompson framed it being continued cause for concern despite a small number of followers “who asked good questions and were willing to listen.”

Enlisting others to do one’s racist dirty work is one of the skills Karens are famous for. Yet unlike the everyday [Karen who calls the cops because, e.g., a Black birder has asked that she leash her dog](#), Power Karens’ networks permit them to wield more stealthy and layered harms.

In the chapter “I Do Not Care For These Stories” (*You’ll Never Believe What Happened to Lacey*), sisters Amber Ruffin and Lacey Lamar share the narrative of their parents’ one-time successful day care business until the day Jill Bratcher, “a woman whose job it is to decide which facilities can receive money from the government,” *cusses out* one of the teachers on staff. When the authors’ mother stands up for her employee, Bratcher who “thinks it’s okay to come into this place with Black people and start cussing at them” becomes very upset. After justifying, “Come on. You know you guys use profanity,” this Power Karen manages to orchestrate the eventual shutdown of the Ruffin’s business. Bratcher’s connections to government officials makes this injustice possible.

Power Karens leverage *networks* to marginalize Black individuals for any petty reason they see fit. I’ve seen a Power Karen burn a Black person’s bridges throughout the media advocacy community because they offered PK a garaged parking place so that her car wouldn’t get towed on the street. No joke. To this day, her reaction that one witness called “deranged” (I concur as witness #2) evades reasonable explanation ... which is, of course, part of the Karen package in general.

Last fall I received an email from the very same Power Karen asking me to – for free – proofread and provide feedback for a report about Black women’s opportunities in the entertainment industry before it went to publication. Concerned about this person’s past behavior and her habit of only being in touch when it seemed she needed a Black token, I thanked her for the opportunity and asked if she had time for a call so that I might ask some questions. “I don’t have time for a call to discuss reviewing a report.” Power Karen enraged. I haven’t heard from her since ... and yes, I also smell smoke from the timber she is burning.

Power Karens are casting directors and producers who hobble opportunities because of a Black talent’s push back about stereotypes or compensation disparities. They rescind awards and invitations to speak and deny tenure. While [Rita Moreno](#) and [Phylicia Rashad](#) might face immediate public confrontation – with a side of love – for the harmful and problematic statements they make, Power Karens are rarely challenged by any voice that gets traction.

Such being the case, Stacey Patton notes, “If white women decide that they feel uncomfortable, upset, or threatened—again, without any cause or provocation—they know they can always call in the white patriarchal soldiers to back up their racist suspicions.” Patton adds to her [observation](#) that “white women ... are most comfortable displacing their rage and disappointment onto Black people,” and while the “soldiers” are most obvious in law enforcement, Power Karens leverage the deference they are given from the public at large as well as their private reserves, expecting that they will be believed no matter what and the Black person will be “put back in his or her place.”

Erika Stallings hints at Power Karens’ motivation in regard to misogynracism: “[When Black women resist their status as pets, they find themselves transforming into a threat.](#)” There is nothing more

threatening to Power Karens than a Black woman who won't do their bidding or sing their praises, and even worse: a Black woman who tells the truth about them.

I once sat in an audience of lawyers listening to a panelist proclaim himself to be the first [Skadden Fellow](#) focusing on veterans' benefits and VA disability claims, working at the time for Swords To Plowshares in San Francisco. I raised my hand. "I was actually the first Skadden Fellow to do such work, with Swords To Plowshares, in fact," evidenced by not only my numerous clients and cases but also my [law review article](#) cited by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. He was shocked, but a Power Karen had successfully erased my contributions from the books because she said, when I asked her why, she was angry I left legal practice for the entertainment industry. The Skadden Fellowship is the "legal Peace Corps," but I leave it to you to figure out why leaving law because of prolific sexual harassment – some, yes, experienced at Swords – would enrage ... of course, Karens don't really need *good* reasons.

I performed in a show in Ashland, Oregon, and the musical director told a racist joke every day. I asked my union what I should do, and the mere fact that I called my union to ask advice placed me on that Power Karen's list. I never again performed in Ashland. A casting director Power Karen worked (and continues to work) at making sure I don't get auditions for any other projects after she conspired to fire an older Black woman from a voiceover job and pay her predecessor less, dynamics I was clear were problematic. Power Karens who take issue with my perspective on law's role in countering employment discrimination in the entertainment industry and the responsibility of unions to protect civil rights have leveraged their networks to keep me from bookings, including a local union president who has looked me directly in the eye while she badmouths me to others. I'm never sure why Karens' audiences just eat it up.

I told the story at an event in Idaho that my father once was pulled over by police, certain it was because he drove an old red van in a wealthy town where higher-end vehicles were expected. Nods of understanding. "No one questions my father's take," I said. "But if a Black person says they were pulled over for being Black, then the *beyond a reasonable doubt* standard kicks in." Karens in the audience glared at me, I guess feeling I had deceived them into noticing the difference in their own reactions to each narrative. I was swiftly taken off a similar panel scheduled for a few months later, one that ended up being all White women. A "progressive" Power Karen who argued against all-male panels and disparaged the men who speak on them patted herself on the back because while participating in this all-White-woman panel, an audience member pointed out the racial homogeneity. I know. Doesn't make sense, but Power Karens seem to praise themselves for as little justification as they harm Black people.

Currently airing on PBS is the documentary [The Neutral Ground](#), a brilliant exploration of "New Orleans' fight over monuments and America's troubled romance with the Lost Cause." An important but perhaps quickly forgotten moment in the film highlights the pivotal role of White Southern women – who survived their fathers, husbands, sons, and other White male loved ones killed in the Civil War – in fabricating a softer version of slavery. Challenging these fictions, born in part of heartbreak and love, is as difficult as it is exhausting.

I am compelled by Hannah-Jones's [determination](#) to go where she is wanted and celebrated, relinquishing "The burden of working for racial justice [which] is laid on the very people bearing the brunt of the injustice, and not the powerful people who maintain it." Too many White people neglect how powerful their privilege is and the many ways it maintains injustice and antiblackness. It is not my job to remedy that failure. In the words of Laci Mosley, "[We \[Black women\] deserve](#)

to not be the mules for every single cause.”

Still, it gnaws at me. As we approach the four hundred ninety-fifth anniversary of the first enslaved Africans reaching what are now U.S. shores (9 August 1526, South Carolina née [San Miguel de Gualdape](#)), a famed, supposedly progressive historian painting a picture of enslaved people supporting the status quo because they did not do “the right thing” and escape bleeds into depictions of those same people in popular media. Is that why Kanye West thinks slavery was a choice? Is that why “[I am not my ancestors](#)” became the new way to discount and disrespect the actual human beings who suffered? Is the focus on [1619](#) because those Africans enslaved here in 1526 did “the right thing” and escaped? Beyond the risk to life and limb any enslaved person faces in trying to leave bondage and even after they succeed (remember that Frederick Douglass had to keep escaping and [ended up in Britain](#)), there is cause to remain with family, loved ones, community and try to make lives easier and more equitable.

In the future, a historian may argue that the Black people terrorized by police in the first quarter of the 21st century should have long ago left U.S. borders, that expats of the African diaspora are the only oppressed citizens to model oneself after. Let’s hope that by then, the power no longer lies with the Karens.

I, for one, am sticking around to make sure that it doesn’t.

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