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USING BLACK LIVES AS IF THEY DON'T MATTER: THE FAMOUS FOUR¹ AND OTHER SERIOUS STORIES OF CAPITALISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

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INTRODUCTION

In an essay on the sexualization of race in the United States, philosopher Naomi Zack discusses an important shift in how Black motherhood has been viewed in relation to American capitalism.² During slavery, Zack notes, Black mothers were considered vessels of capitalist production.³ In other words, their offspring, whether fathered by enslaved Africans or white slave owners, increased the capital of human livestock. Yet, during the post-Emancipation era, particularly after New Deal social reforms, Black women who had more than two or three children were cast as “irresponsible, selfish, over-sexed . . . extract[ors] from an otherwise financially solvent system.”⁴ Like other diametrically opposed binaries surrounding race

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1. *Good Milk for the Famous Four* (advertisement), PITTSBURGH COURIER, August 5, 1950, at 5 [hereinafter *Good Milk*].

2. Naomi Zack, *The American Sexualization of Race*, in *RACE/SEX: THEIR SAMENESS, DIFFERENCE, AND INTERPLAY* 151–52 (Naomi Zack ed., 1997).

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 151.

in America,⁵ this understanding of Black procreation as either production or consumption is telling. Specifically, this perception illustrates how race has been and continues to be deployed as a material and representational resource in a variety of American marketplace settings. In recounting the story of the once famous Fultz quadruplets' roles in popularizing baby formula among African American consumers, Andrea Freeman's *Skimmed: Breastfeeding, Race, and Injustice* underscores the complexity surrounding race and marketing and the ambivalent complicity of many of the actors involved. In *Skimmed*, Freeman uses the Fultz quadruplets' tragic story as an entry point to discussing significant questions related to racial inequalities, health disparities, and the federal government's ongoing prioritization of capitalist arrangements over Black lives.

Following their 1946 birth in rural North Carolina, the Fultz sisters—the first surviving identical quadruplets born in United States—were pursued by several national dairy companies. These companies intended to use the Fultz quadruplets to promote their baby formula products. A key agent in the injustice that unfolded was the babies' delivering doctor, Dr. Fred Klenner. After fielding offers from companies like Borden and Carnation, Dr. Klenner negotiated a deal with the Pet Milk Company of St. Louis. The immediate interest in using the “famous four” to sell formula, initiated in no small part by Klenner's diabolical designs, can be attributed to several intersecting factors beyond the quadruplets' first-ever celebrity. First, during the post-war era, there was an increase in multiple-child births, which highlighted the challenges mothers faced in providing ample amounts of breastmilk. As a result, the formula industry sought identical twins and triplets to highlight the issue while advertising their products. Naturally, the endearing Fultz quadruplets were viewed as prize poster children by companies like Pet Milk. Second, the Fultz quadruplets were Black. Around this time, many American companies began to take note of a largely ignored Negro market.⁶ In particular, the reported rises in Black annual income during the 1940s identified the emerging Black middle class as an untapped consumer base. Finally,

5. I am thinking of such binaries as hyper-visibility/invisibility or hate/desire.

6. Marcel Rosa-Salas, *Making the Mass White: How Racial Segregation Shaped Consumer Segmentation*, in *RACE IN THE MARKETPLACE: CROSSING CRITICAL BOUNDARIES* 30 (Guillaume D. Johnson et al. eds., 2019).

the Fultz girls were born to poor, rural tenant farmers, making it easier for a well-connected White supremacist doctor and a prominent corporation to wrestle the girls away from their parents and to exploit them.

The Pet Milk Company's use of the Fultz quadruplets as poster girls for their marketing campaign marks a pivotal moment in the ways mainstream American corporations managed their representations of Blackness to potential Black consumers. Until then, many white-owned companies sought to peddle cheap products to Black customers. However, in the early 1950s, market research began recommending advertisements that emphasized the "quality and prestige" associated with products.⁷ Indeed, Black consumers, like all consumers, were increasingly presented with a desired lifestyle and the message that the key to attaining it was purchasing particular products.

One of the earliest examples of such lifestyle investment occurred years prior when Black consumers creatively circumvented racial barriers to luxury automobile ownership in pursuit of General Motors' (GM) topline Cadillac brand.⁸ As early as the 1920s, African Americans recognized automobiles as a means to freeing themselves from some of the stigma connected to Jim Crow segregation—most notably the indignities of travel by public transit.⁹ Cadillac's early pursuit of the prestige market included a refusal to sell to non-whites. However, wealthy Black Americans thwarted the company's efforts by contracting white buyers to front for them. It was not until the midst of the Great Depression when GM was in dire straits, and its Cadillac division was on the verge of collapse, that a GM executive (reportedly) encouraged the company to open its doors to the Negro market—a decision believed to have saved Cadillac.¹⁰

7. *The Negro Market: How to Tap \$15 Billion in Sales*, TIME (July 5, 1954), <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,858526,00.html>.

8. Warren Brown, *Cadillac's Cultural Turn*, WASH. POST (Dec. 24, 1995), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1995/12/24/cadillacs-cultural-turn/7374f4c7-b78f-4007-9938-51ab24bf3522/>.

9. Arthur Franklin Raper, PREFACE TO PEASANTRY: A TALE OF TWO BLACK BELT COUNTIES 175 (1936).

10. Margaret Myers & Sharon G. Dean, "*Cadillac Flambé*": *Race and Brand Identity*, 13 CHARM 157, 160 (2007).

While luxury automobiles represented major purchases only available to select Black drivers, efforts to market baby formula were aimed at a broader swath of the African American consumer market. Pet Milk, in particular, launched an advertising campaign centered on the “happy family.” The campaign strategically targeted the post-war aspirations of middle-class Black families.¹¹ In their effort to tug on the emotions and dreams of potential Black customers, the company recruited light-skinned twins, triplets, and, of course, the Fultz quadruplets.¹² This appeal to sentiment was augmented by another approach that capitalized on the medical establishment’s growing success in undermining midwifery (commonly practiced in Black communities) and touted the growing field of pediatrics.¹³ As the result of calculated efforts to transpose the sites of parenting expertise from Black families and communities to the hegemonic spaces of medicine, science, and business, Black infants were positioned in the crosshairs of what Freeman calls “*first food*” oppression (p. 8).¹⁴

Through a veneer of advanced science, formula was presented as a nutritionally fortified alternative to breast milk. Specifically, formula’s association with the medical establishment, supported by slick packaging designed by companies like Mead Johnson (Enfamil) and Abbot Laboratories (Similac), created the impression feeding babies formula could be healthier than breastfeeding. However, according to Freeman, the high-sugar content of many formula varieties—including the more economical evaporated milk mixtures promoted by companies like Borden, Carnation, and Pet Milk—increased the likelihood formula-fed babies would crave sugared foods into adulthood. Despite being presented as “easy for babies to

11. Adetola F. Louis-Jacques et. al., *Historical Antecedents of Breastfeeding for African American Women: from the Pre-Colonial Period to the Mid-Twentieth Century* 7 J. RACIAL & ETHNIC HEALTH DISPARITIES 1003, 1009 (2020).

12. *Id.*

13. Corey Meghan MacDonald, “We Listen to Women”: Exploring Midwifery in Virginia from Certified Nurse-Midwives and Certified Professional Midwives (2007) (M.S. Thesis, Virginia Tech) (on file with author).

14. See also Andrea Freeman, “*First Food*” Justice: Racial Disparities in Infant Feeding as Food Oppression, 83 FORDHAM L. REV. 3053, 3066 15. Judy Foster Davis, *Realizing Marketplace Opportunity: How Research on the Black Consumer Market Influenced Mainstream Marketers, 1920-1970*, 5 J. HIST. RSCH. MKTG. 471, 474 (2013); *Good Milk*, *supra* note 1.

digest,” “uniformly rich,” and “always safe,” baby formula was very much in the same unhealthy vein as cigarettes, liquor, and sugary soft drinks, which were historically marketed to Black consumers.¹⁵

Black consumers were particularly susceptible to the images of cultured sophistication promoted by the formula industry. Such depictions ran counter to the anthropologic representations of African descended peoples as closer to nature, not fully human, and uncivilized.¹⁶ This “African American quest for modernization” continues to manifest, for example, in tendencies to avoid outdoor recreation and careers in agriculture.¹⁷ In the Black collective memory of historical traumas surrounding slavery, sharecropping, and lynching, rural spaces represent sites of backwardness and danger. The meanings associated with formula had additional appeal in that they went some way in redeeming the historical indignations related to Black women wet-nursing white infants. Thus, in 1946, when Pet Milk made the Fultz quadruplets the center of its decades long advertising campaign, the science of baby formula aligned with the interests of many within the Black community. Particularly, those who sought to present themselves as respectable individuals who were no longer on the farm and very much a part of urbane America.¹⁸ As one of several heart-wrenching stories offered in *Skimmed*, Freeman recounts how Pet Milk worked in conjunction with Klenner to remove the Fultz daughters from their farming family, placing them under the legal custody of nurse Elma Saylor and her husband.

Through its arrangement with Dr. Klenner, Pet Milk initially purchased a largely uncultivable plot of “farmland” for Annie Mae

15. Judy Foster Davis, *Realizing Marketplace Opportunity: How Research on the Black Consumer Market Influenced Mainstream Marketers, 1920-1970*, 5 J. HIST. RSCH. MKTG. 471, 474 (2013); *Good Milk*, *supra* note 1.

16. Kimberly Seals Allers, *Breastfeeding: Some Slavery Crap?*, EBONY (Aug. 13, 2012), <https://www.ebony.com/health/breastfeeding-some-slavery-crap/>.

17. Cassandra Y. Johnson & Josh McDaniel, *Turpentine Negro*, in “TO LOVE THE WIND AND THE RAIN”: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY 62 (Diane D. Glave et al. eds., 2004); CAROLINE FINNEY, BLACK FACES, WHITE SPACES: REIMAGINING THE RELATIONSHIP OF AFRICAN AMERICANS TO THE GREAT OUTDOORS 60 (2014); Jacob Rowell, *Exploring Minority Youth Conceptions of the Food System Through a Hip-Hop Based Learning Workshop* (2020) (M.S. Thesis, Virginia Tech) (on file with author).

18. RICHÉ J. DANIEL BARNES, RAISING THE RACE: BLACK CAREER WOMEN REDEFINE MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND COMMUNITY 11 (2016).

and “Pete” Fultz to raise their ten children. The arrangement included building a four-room farmhouse on the property and paying for two nurses to oversee the quadruplets’ good health. If the famous four were to be living testaments of the benefits of Pet Milk—drinking *only* Pet Milk products since they were eleven hours old¹⁹—the company had a vested interest in presenting the girls as healthy and happy. By their sixth birthday, Pet Milk decided this portrayal was more efficiently and economically achieved by placing the girls under the Saylor’s legal guardianship. In a tragic episode harkening back to the earliest American settlers’ most criminal dealings with non-literate indigenous custodians of the land, Klenner and Pet Milk deceived Pete Fultz into signing over custody of his daughters. Such backhanded dealings with the poorest, least educated, and most vulnerable members of society should come as no surprise. From the dispossession of Native Americans to voter suppression through literacy tests, such practices have been and continue to be primary forms of exploitation, maintaining and expanding White Supremacy.²⁰

The collusion of big business and medicine that had disastrous effects on the Fultz family represents a microcosm of the larger project of using pharmaceutical marketing—including free samples of formula dished out by delivery room doctors—to cultivate a generation of Black consumers’ addictions to sugary, over-processed unhealthy foods.

In the production realm, the connection between capitalism, sugar, and Black people has an even longer history. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz reflects on sugar’s central place as a critical commodity in the rise of global capitalism: “[W]orld sugar production shows the most remarkable upward production curve of any major food on the world market over the course of several centuries.”²¹ Unquestionably,

19. *Good Milk*, *supra* note 1.

20. See CLAUDIO SAUNT, *UNWORTHY REPUBLIC: THE DISPOSSESSION OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE ROAD TO INDIAN TERRITORY* (2020); see also Natasha N. Jones & Miriam F. Williams, *Technologies of Disenfranchisement: Literacy Tests and Black Voters in the US from 1890 to 1965*, 65 *TECH. COMM’N* 371 (2018); see also Max Haiven, *The Uses of Financial Literacy: Financialization, the Radical Imagination, and the Unpayable Debts of Settler Colonialism*, 13 *CULTURAL POL.* 348 (2017).

21. SIDNEY W. MINTZ, *SWEETNESS AND POWER: THE PLACE OF SUGAR IN MODERN HISTORY* xxi (1985).

enslaved Africans' labor, working on Caribbean and South American plantations, was the engine for this productive rise. During this same period, sugar was transformed from a luxury good of the European aristocracy to vital caloric fuel and a dietary staple for the working class.²² Given the entangled relationship between sugar (both its production and consumption) and the exploitation of Black labor, the role of baby formula in fostering sugar addiction—a drama in which the Fultz quadruplets were centrally placed—forms a significant chapter in a grand historical epoch of capitalism and White Supremacy.

Simultaneously, the \$70 billion formula industry claimed the virtuous role of liberating women from the need to breastfeed, thus allowing women greater flexibilities in the workforce and more opportunities for career advancement. As Freeman effectively shows, through changes in accepted social norms, legal reforms, and community-based solutions, it is possible for mothers to breastfeed and advance in their careers. Regrettably, as some of these shifts occur, reforms are most likely to impact young families well situated in societal spaces of progressive privilege. In other words, without deliberate antiracist reforms, working-class Black mothers will likely be left behind in these gains.

Representationally, the “happy family” campaign featuring the beautiful Fultz girls departed from the previous demeaning representations of Black people in advertising—most notably the handkerchief-head-wearing Aunt Jemima, the bow-tied maître d' Uncle Ben, and breakfast chef “Rastas” from the Cream of Wheat box.²³ Where these earlier icons represented Black service-workers, who served their associated products, the Fultz quadruplets themselves consumed the baby formula they advertised. Their healthy dispositions served as evidence of Pet Milk formula's effectiveness. Such imagery foretold of later campaigns where, for example, Billy Dee Williams's sex appeal represented the virility that comes from drinking *Colt 45*, Diahann Carroll achieved glamour through the *La Sallé 10's* fingernail strengthening system, and Michael Jordan's athleticism was attributed to his Air Jordan sneakers

22. *Id.* at 149.

23. Davis, *supra* note 15, at 476.

(i.e., “it’s gotta be the shoes”).²⁴ For such marketing campaigns to be successful, not only did companies need to tap into consumers’ desires and emotions, but they also had to fortify relationships of trust with their customer base.²⁵

One strategy to build the company-consumer bond involved hiring special marketing representatives to serve as liaisons between the corporate offices and the Black consumers they sought to entice. Following in the footsteps of pioneers like James “Billboard” Jackson, hired as a special representative to Esso Standard Oil Company in the mid-1930s, a generation of Black marketing specialists worked for companies like Phillip Morris, Pabst Brewing, and Pepsi during the 1930s and 1940s to facilitate connections with their desired Black customers.²⁶ Pet Milk contributed to this generation by hiring Delores Pierce and Louise Prothro, notably two of the few women in these positions at the time. Prothro, at times referred to as “the less known but more real face of Pet Milk,” traveled extensively with the Fultz sisters during their teenage years.²⁷ In many ways, this sophisticated and internationally known home economist—holding a master’s degree in food and nutrition from Columbia University Teachers College—represented everything the Black community hoped for and expected from the celebrity quadruplets (p. 165). In addition to appearing on several television and radio broadcasts, when Pet Milk

24. David J. Moore, Jerome D. Williams, & William J. Qualls, *Target Marketing of Tobacco and Alcohol-Related Products to Ethnic Minority Groups in the United States* 6 ETHNICITY & DISEASE 83, 91 (1996). See Advertisement of Diahann Carroll for La Salle “10,” in COSMOPOLITAN (May 1988). See generally Catherine A. Coleman, *Classic Campaigns—“It’s Gotta Be the Shoes”*: Nike, Mike and Mars and the “Sneaker Killings”, 14 ADVERT. & SOC’Y REV. (2013), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/513992>.

25. Robert M. Morgan & Shelby D. Hunt, *The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing*, 58 J. MKTG. 20, 31 (1994).

26. Anthony Kwame Harrison, *White Reign: An Autoethnography of Black Automobility: The Ongoing Search for James ‘Billboard’ Jackson* DYSFUNCTION, June 25–27, 2019, at 4–11; STEPHANIE CAPPARELL, THE REAL PEPSI CHALLENGE: THE INSPIRATIONAL STORY OF BREAKING THE COLOR BARRIER IN AMERICAN BUSINESS 64–95 (2007); JASON CHAMBERS, MADISON AVENUE AND THE COLOR LINE: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY 61 (2009).

27. Kimberley Mangun & Lisa M. Parcell, *The Pet Milk Company “Happy Family” Advertising Campaign: A Groundbreaking Appeal to the Negro Market of the 1950s*, 40 JOURNALISM HIST. 70, 72 (2014).

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debuted its new “sparkle and vitality” beverage in 1958, Prothro was a featured model photographed in a “formal dining and dancing gown” created by New York City designer Verlie Morrison.²⁸

Prothro should receive credit for continuing to support the Fultz sisters, in gesture and deed, through their final years working with Pet Milk. Initially, the negotiated terms for the infant quadruplets included scholarships to enroll in Bennett College, a historically Black liberal arts college just outside of Greensboro. Yet as the girls grew older, their once-promising educational futures began to dim—in part due to their busy travel schedule regularly taking them out of school and on the road in service to their corporate sponsor. In short, the Pet Milk Company happily promoted a storybook vision of future health and happiness, which included pursuing higher education in a distinguished institution, to adorable and identical quadruplets whose image Pet Milk sought to exploit. Yet, the company neglected to provide the consistent support necessary to help the Fultz sisters realize this future. Pet Milk mostly paid attention to the quadruplets when it was convenient and served the company’s interest. Amidst the dawning realities of the girls’ educational limitations, the compounding pressures of teenage, celebrity angst, and the fact they missed their mother terribly, it was Prothro who, by all accounts, consistently supported and comforted the girls. Upon their eighteenth birthday, when the Pet Milk Company began the process of unceremoniously releasing the famous four, it was Prothro who managed to get them a scholarship at Bethune-Cookman, a historically Black college in Florida.²⁹

Whether due to her allegiance to Pet Milk and her career or a testament to being a consummate and tactful professional, Prothro maintained that the Pet Milk Company provided a tremendous service for the Fultz quadruplets. In sum, the company purchased infertile land for the Fultz family, ended up taking the girls away from their parents and sibling, provided their guardians with a monthly allowance that barely kept them above the poverty line, occasionally showered the girls with gifts, and whisked them around the country to be on display. It is also unclear if Prothro was aware Dr. Klenner

28. *New Product Inspires Fashion Creation*, FLA. STAR, Mar. 8, 1958, at 8.

29. Charles L. Saunders, *The Fultz Quads: Grown-Up, Disappointed and Bitter*, EBONY, Nov. 1968, at 218.

performed experimental treatments on the girls, which included regular injections of vitamin C. Meanwhile, Pet Milk became a household name within the Black community, having many of its most successful years during the famous four's reign as poster girls for their product.

Louise Prothro's complicated role in the Fultz quadruplets' story illustrates how, even with good intentions, actors caught in transactions of race and marketing can unwittingly advance White Supremacy by enabling the corporate exploitation of race—even while consoling young girls who miss their mother. It is a warning for any of us in the business of race and marketing to be aware of who we align with and whose interests we ultimately serve. Race exists as both a political category and political system infused into the core of market capitalism.³⁰ Efforts to intervene in and/or undermine its pernicious impacts tend to be most effective when conscious and deliberate.

The famous four's story is a tale of four young girls being *used*—obviously for their specialness as quadruplets but also their Blackness—to help a predatory formula industry target a new consumer base. As the drama played out, the girls and their families found themselves incapable of resisting the powerful interests at work. Moreover, through Louise Prothro's and Fred Klenner's actions, we see individuals significantly better positioned than the Fultz family *using* the girls to further their interests and careers. Klenner's case is less complicated and despicable. The racist doctor seized on the opportunity to further his and his family's fortunes and tried to bolster his professional reputation by *using* the quadruplets as human guinea pigs. Prothro is far more complex. To the best of our understanding, she seems to have done nothing more than compassionately perform the duties and, in many respects, the moral obligations of her job. Yet, when that job is part of the business of exploiting the images and lives of Black girls in the service of capital accumulation for a morally ambivalent company situated within a patently racist industry and system, calling out injustice is the only response.

30. Guillaume D. Johnson, Kevin D. Thomas, Anthony Kwame Harrison, & Sonya A Grier, *Introduction*, in *RACE IN THE MARKETPLACE: CROSSING CRITICAL BOUNDARIES* 1–17 (Guillaume D. Johnson, et al. eds., 2019).

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Skimmed details how an overzealous and racist doctor, a complacent circle of intermediaries, and corporate interests worked together to usher in an era of baby formula dependency within Black communities by breaking apart a Black family. Additionally, these actors furthered the commodification of Blackness as a representational force that continues to serve big business to the detriment of Black people. Freeman powerfully portrays how Black families were colonized within their own homes (and sites of nurturing) through economic processes and market commodities. When Black people consume in an effort to defy racism and express membership in mainstream American society, what are they gaining and what are they risking?³¹ What are the stakes when Black communities turn away from culturally situated forms of knowledge and unquestionably privilege the knowledge of societally defined consultants and experts? If Black lives are to matter, we must continue to cultivate awareness of the various political and economic purposes that Black people's lives, and how they are represented, are marshaled to serve. In negotiating these racially sloped landscapes, we must proceed with all deliberateness.

31. See Michèle Lamont & Virág Molnár, *How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape Their Collective Identity: Evidence From Marketing Specialists* 1 J. CONSUMER CULTURE 31 (2001).