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Why did a Cheerios Commercial Spark a racist Melt-down?

The controversy over the new Cheerios ad is not about a fear of cross-racial contact in general, but the fear of cross-racial contact -- that between black men and white women. To understand the specific nature of this particular racist outburst, we need to go back to slavery.

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The controversy over the new Cheerios ad is not about a fear of cross-racial contact in general, but the fear of a *certain type* of cross-racial contact. In the thirty-second ad, a very cute and obviously bi-racial girl asks her white mother if it is true that Cheerios is good for your heart. After assurances from her mother, the girl hurries from the kitchen. We then see the handsome black father/husband stretched out on the sofa sleeping. As he opens his eyes and begins to rise, we see Cheerios spill down his chest where his young daughter has presumably placed them. Awwww! And I am not being facetious either.

What could be more heart-warming than the sight of a precious little girl in a loving home, more touching than a young child demonstrating concern for their parent's health and well-being? The "problem" with the ad is the audience, or a part thereof that is so deeply wedded to dated racial ideals that the thought of a loving and devoted family created by people of different races is an anathema. The issue is not that the ad showed a black person and a white person in a relationship, but that the ad showed a black *man* and a white *woman* in a relationship that was read as both sexual and romantic through the figure of their bi-racial child.

Upon analysis the commercial is actually a rather tame statement on cross-racial sexual contact and relationships. Why? Well for starters, the black husband and his white wife are not even shown in the same room of the house, much less touching, kissing or even addressing each other face-to-face. Their communication takes place through the conduit of their daughter who addresses the mother verbally and interacts with the father through her "gift" of the Cheerios, left on his chest. The ad does not represent even mundane marital contact between the two adults. Instead, it asks the audience to assume that romantic, sexual contact has already taken place because of the existence of the bi-racial daughter. So then, what is all of the fuss about?

Well as I said at the start, the backlash is about a panic that attaches to a *certain type* of cross-racial contact - that between black men and white women. To understand the specific nature of this particular racist outburst, we need to go back to slavery. Across various regions in the transatlantic world, slavery was perpetuated within colonial legal discourse through the enslaved black female body. Any child born to an enslaved female was born a “slave,” regardless of the race or social status of the father. As would be expected, such a system incentivized rape since any child born to enslaved females became the property of their white slave owners at birth. Therefore, at the same time that black women, stereotyped as sexually lascivious and deviant, were being prolifically exploited, upper class white women enjoyed, in comparison, a large degree of strategic protection from white men. Strategic since, within a patriarchal system that was also founded on a racial hierarchy, the white female literally became the reproducer of freedom. White women were prized within the domestic realm, and through legal marriage were legitimized as the wives of white men who needed to control white female sexuality and fertility in order to reproduce their power. If it is not already clear, many of these white men who were at once reproducing their white privilege through their white progeny from their white wives, were also creating disenfranchised mixed-race children through the coercion, exploitation and outright rape of their enslaved black females. While one family line was born white and free, the other was born black and enslaved. This is the story of Thomas Jefferson and many, many others across the Americas.

But while the white male slave owning classes aggressively sought to exploit the sexuality of their “breeding wenches” for “natural increase” (and by now you may have guessed that “natural increase” was not at all natural), they also sought to ensure that other races of men were denied access to that vessel of freedom known as the white woman. The celebrated historian Sir Hilary Beckles has explored a poignant case in the context of eighteenth-century Barbados. When Irish indentured servants first arrived in the island, both men and women were frequently put to work in the sugarcane fields, alongside enslaved Africans. But the English male ruling elite quickly observed a development that was not to their liking or benefit. The romantic and sexual relationships being formed between African men and Irish women were deeply worrisome since they produced free people of colour, mixed-race people who would demand rights and privileges, people who would contest the English male strangle-hold on the colony. What happened? Through legislation, the Irish women were removed from the fields and through terror, African men were taught that white women were off limits.

Returning to the Cheerios ad, I believe that we have yet to come to grips with this deeply troubling colonial history of cross-racial contact between blacks and whites that first played out within slavery. It would appear that even this unassuming, gentle black man, who in his perplexed state calls his wife (“Kim?”) for help, is deemed a threat to white women. Or more to the point, to white men. It is clear to me, and many others, that the same level of racist backlash would not have occurred if the commercial had cast a black mother and a white father. This pairing (as a legitimate, loving couple) is even more rare, in our streets and on our screens, than the one that General Mills represented. After making “Things We Lost in the Fire” (2007) with the white actor David Duchovny,

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the Oscar-winner Halle Berry (herself mixed-race) commented on the trials of getting Hollywood to imagine mixed-race children for the film. In the wake of the backlash, General Mills has kept the ad and disabled the comment section. A step in the right direction.