ABSTRACT
On September 22, 2014, Medolac Laboratories, a company in Oregon that processes human milk, announced an initiative to purchase pumped breast milk from African-American mothers in Detroit, Michigan. Angry about Medolac's predatory initiative to target this population, a community of Black female breastfeeding activists, or Blacktavists, swiftly took to blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to express their concerns. We argue that Blacktavists—working on, against, and through the Black breastfeeding body—constructed a persuasive narrative about Medolac's campaign that made visible (a) the historical legacy of Black labor for White interests, (b) the economic value of that labor, and (c) whiteness as a racial category. Overall, our study explores the valuable, problematic, and complex characteristics of Blacktavists' advocacy. Future successful advocacy must continue to challenge normative mothering rhetorics to bring about impactful social change.

KEYWORDS
Black women; breastfeeding; intersectionality; social media activism

On September 22, 2014, Medolac Laboratories, a company in Oregon that processes human milk into a shelf-stable product, announced an initiative to purchase pumped breast milk from Black mothers in Detroit, Michigan. Working with the Mother’s Milk Cooperative (a milk bank) and partnering with the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), Medolac planned to recruit 2,000 “urban milk donors” for the cooperative (Medolac, 2014). To rationalize this action, Medolac explained how their efforts to recruit low-income Black women in Detroit would ultimately benefit a population that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2013), has the lowest breastfeeding initiation rates of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. The aims were articulated in a press release announcing the program:

The company seeks to increase breastfeeding rates among urban African American Women by forming a local partnership campaign to support the growth of the Mothers Milk Cooperative’s donor base, promoting healthy behavior and prolonged breastfeeding within their communities. (Medolac, 2014, para. 1)

As Medolac is a for-profit company, the plan to purchase these new donors’ pumped milk for $1.00 and sell it to hospitals drew criticism from lactation activists. As one prominent blogger, Kimberly Seals Allers (2014), charged, the company “processes the milk
into a commercially sterile, shelf-stable product and sells it to hospitals for about $7 an ounce—a 600 percent markup” (para. 2). Noting the demographic makeup of the Detroit area and Medolac’s exploitation of this community, Allers (2014) further explained, “It’s one thing to commodify mother’s milk, but to try to commodify a group of women—specifically black women, who already have a difficult history with breast-feeding—seems, a bit, well, sour” (para. 4).

Angry about Medolac’s predatory initiative to target and exploit low-income Black women in Detroit, a community of Black female breastfeeding activists, or Blacktavists, swiftly took to blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to express their concerns. Collaborating to stop Medolac’s campaign, Blacktavists produced and shared image macros, blog posts, open letters, Facebook status updates, and Twitter hashtags to voice their complaints. The swell of concern resulted in Blacktavist Kiddada Green penning an open letter to Medolac, wherein she described the company’s initiative and listed the questions she and other Blacktavists had about the campaign. The letter was posted to the Black Mothers’ Breastfeeding Association’s (BMBFA) website—a Detroit-based nonprofit of which Green is founder and executive director—and allowed individuals to sign in solidarity with Blacktavists who sought answers from Medolac. In 10 days, the letter gathered more than 600 signatures (Green, 2015a) and was successful in that it prompted Medolac to retire its campaign on January 21, 2015.

Blacktavists working on, against, and through the Black breastfeeding body constructed a persuasive narrative about Medolac’s campaign that made visible (a) the historical legacy of Black labor for White interests, (b) the economic value of that labor, and (c) whiteness as a racial category—all in ways illustrating the beneficial, problematic, and complex characteristics of Blacktavists’ advocacy. Through this analysis, we discuss what these strategies suggest about the rhetorics of reproduction (specifically about discourses that reproduce ideological understandings of Black motherhood), ultimately noting that Blacktavists’ use of visibility strategies may have halted Medolac’s campaign but failed to shift normative national discourses about Black motherhood.

Focusing particular attention on Blacktavists’ “Stop Medolac” campaign, we use refracting lenses of race, class, and sexuality to reveal how contemporary notions of Black motherhood are (re)constructed in discourse. To scaffold this analysis, we begin by contextualizing Black motherhood, discussing how U.S. racial histories contribute to contemporary understandings of Black mothering as a form of labor. Exploring this with particular attention to intersectionality, we explain how discourses of Black motherhood (generally) and the act of breastfeeding (specifically) marginalize Black women’s infant-feeding decisions and discuss the implications of this for Blacktavists’ rhetoric. Finally, we address the ways that these activists use visibility as a strategy to (re)shape Black mothering rhetorics and how these efforts manage the intersectional positionality of Black breastfeeding women.

Theorizing the visibility of Black motherhood

Medolac sought to profit from Black women’s labor, redirecting Black mothers’ breast milk away from Black infants and toward some wealthy White mothers who could afford to purchase it as a commodity. These efforts, while benefiting White mothers and White corporate interests such as Medolac’s, marginalize Black mothers along multiple axes of identity (including race, gender, sexuality, and social class) and contribute to contemporary
mothering rhetorics that reinforce hierarchical distinctions among and between mothers. Public discourses about Black women breastfeeding draw upon complex histories of race/racism, sexism, and U.S. governmentality and work as cultural forces that elicit advice, support, insult, and disdain. The practice of breastfeeding and its public negotiation, even when supportive, is about surveilling and disciplining women’s bodies (Bartlett, 2003) and contributes to the ways that Black motherhood has historically come to be seen as suspect. Blum (1993), recognizing breastfeeding as concurrently cultural, natural, biological, and socially constructed, points to the highly scrutinized position of the lactating breast within U.S. culture. This position is further complicated by discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as the visibility politics that manage the public conversation about these intersections. As this section theorizes, the cultural narratives about Black motherhood that have circulated throughout the U.S. cultural imaginary have constructed Black women as bad mothers who, among other failings, do not breastfeed their children as they are supposed to. Tracing the historical relationship between Black women and White women, we discuss how Blacktavists’ efforts to increase breastfeeding initiation rates negotiate the historical legacy of Black women laboring outside of the home—often for White women and/or White interests—and the attendant impact of this for Black women’s families and for the positioning of Black mothers within the U.S. social hierarchy.

In the past 25 years, public health efforts to raise breastfeeding initiation rates have become more familiar in the United States, with recent statistics indicating that 79% of women now initiate breastfeeding (CDC, 2014). Despite this “high” number, the CDC (2013) also reported that “Black infants still had the lowest prevalence of breastfeeding initiation and duration” (para. 1); despite increasing in the first decade of the 21st century, these numbers remain lower than those of White or Hispanic infants. Attempting to mitigate low initiation rates in the Black community, Blacktavists have established a significant presence online, using blogs, Facebook, and Twitter to make (and keep) Black breastfeeding visible within the public sphere. Adopting a critical rhetorical orientation, we are interested in the constitutive nature of these texts, the ways that Blacktavists’ discourses reproduce and challenge the ideological understandings and material conditions of Black motherhood, and the visibility politics that organize these discourses. Medolac’s proposal benefits from—and indeed depends upon—increased breastfeeding rates in the Black community. The impact, however, is that White mothers and White-run corporations like Medolac capitalize on the fruits of this lactation labor, reinforcing the historical legacy of exploiting Black labor for White interests.

Occupying a devalued social position (Roberts, 1997) and framed as undeserving of the status of “mother as caregiver” (Triece, 2012, p. 3), Black women have regularly been cast as inadequate mothers (Carpenter, 2012). This deficit is constructed through prevalent cultural narratives that frame Black women as jezebels, matriarchs, welfare queens, and crack mothers, (see, e.g., Carpenter, 2012; Roberts, 1997) and constitute a mythology of Black identity and experience that serves as a backdrop for contemporary U.S. race relations. Specifically, Black women’s relationship to labor and their long history in the workforce as slaves, wet nurses, domestics, and agricultural laborers have marked them as employable (Bell, 1965; Mink, 1995; Triece, 2012). This history contextualizes Medolac’s efforts to recruit poor Black mothers in Detroit into an economy that is designed to service the breastfeeding needs of privileged White mothers and that benefits such corporations as Medolac, who reap the profits from these arrangements.
Against a racist and exploitative historical backdrop, Black mothers are in an impossible position to reconcile. Cultural narratives suggesting they are overdependent on public assistance call on them to labor to demonstrate their self-sufficiency (and subsequent worth/value); however, when they do enter the workforce, they are framed as inadequate mothers. Ironically, Black mothers have often needed to labor outside the home to manage the systemic and institutional racism that has made it exponentially more difficult for Black women and Black families to attain financial solvency. Thus, when Black mothers go to work to support their families, they face critiques that they are too independent and that their absence from the domestic realm of the home is hurting Black families. Triece (2012), paraphrasing Fraser (1989), explained: “The competing demands of capital and care placed poor Black women in a double bind—if they chose to stay home to care for their children, they were labeled lazy or ‘welfare queens;’ if they assumed jobs in the labor force they were labeled ‘failed mothers’” (p. 2). Indeed, scholarship about mothering suggests “the Good White Mother in the U.S. social imagination stands as an idealized standard for femininity that constrains all women across various intersections” (Reid-Brinkley, 2011, p. 46). In this way, Black women are positioned within the U.S. cultural imaginary as inadequate and/or bad mothers whose ambition, independence, and sexuality are suspect.

Feminist scholars, conceptualizing the impact of multiplicity in relation to privilege and subordination, have demonstrated the impacts of intersecting cultural discourses. The vulnerability of the women in Detroit that Medolac’s campaign sought to exploit cannot be understood without simultaneous attention to the historical contexts and discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality that denigrate Black women as more employable, sexually irresponsible, and generally bad mothers. For this reason an intersectional approach affords scholars a way to engage the complex, overlapping, and nuanced manner in which power circulates to place Black mothers within the U.S. social hierarchy. Further, using an intersectional lens to examine Blacktavists’ discourse reveals how these Black women assert agency within the complex power relations in which they are positioned. Roberts (1997) explained: “For centuries a popular mythology has degraded Black women and portrayed them as less deserving of motherhood. Slave owners forced slave women to perform strenuous labor that contradicted the Victorian female roles prevalent in society” (p. 950). Black motherhood, then, has been articulated as a conflicted category whereby Black women are visible in the public sphere as domestic/slave labor rather than as successful heteronormative mothers. Thus, the history of slavery casts Black women’s breasts and their public exposure differently (Blum, 1999).

Blacktavists use visibility to manage the publicity of the Black female body within a heteronormative national landscape that foregrounds whiteness, middle-/upper-class status, and heterosexuality. Rand (2013), explaining some of the complexities of visibility, noted:

If the radical gesture of visibility politics is the insertion of the vulnerable physical body into public discourse and the relinquishment of the privilege of bodily abstraction, then the effects of visibility politics for those marked by gender, sexuality, race, and class, who are always already hyperembodied and visible, are much less predictable. (p. 123)

Thus, when those who have the benefit of passing as heterosexual, as White, or as middle or upper class decide to “out” themselves, they have some ability to control the impressions they make on others; however, those individuals who are unable to manage concealing or revealing their differences cannot predictably anticipate the ways they will
be treated. The concurrent visibility and invisibility of Black women in the public sphere have relied on the normalcy of whiteness and heteronormativity as a standard against which to measure their performance of motherhood (Carpenter, 2012). Thus, Black women courted by Medolac’s campaign are at once hypervisible in their deviation from whiteness and heteronormativity and invisible in the ways multiple axes of oppression have marginalized them from public representation. In this way, Blacktavists must manage visibility to reorient Black women’s relationship to motherhood through the practice of breastfeeding. For the non-White female body, visibility is fraught with complications that have profound implications for the publicly breastfeeding body whose practice may at once be a necessity as well as a political action. Indeed, to be subject to interlocking dominant discourses of power and the complementary frameworks of visibility they employ positions Black mothers such that they must embrace (hyper)visibility to assert themselves within the public sphere.

**Conducting a rhetorical analysis of online activism**

Within a four-month window—between September 22, 2014, when Medolac announced their campaign, and January 21, 2015, when they officially retired their efforts—Blacktavists, lactation consultants, and activists rallied to challenge Medolac’s predatory Detroit campaign. Relying on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and organizational websites to inspire support for their cause, these Blacktavists created texts that are a compelling example of the ways Internet technologies and social media can be used for activism and, as such, are productive sites for rhetorical inquiry. Even though Medolac announced its campaign in September 2014, it was not until December 3, 2014, when Blacktavist Kimberly Seals Allers, a consultant for BMBFA and a blogger, wrote and published a post on *New York Times* parenting blog *Motherlode* that many Blacktavists became invested. Allers’s post drew forth a multitude of social media responses from across the nation, including Internet image macros, Twitter comments, Facebook posts, and eventually Kiddada Green’s open letter to Medolac, which was widely circulated and shared across the Blacktavist community. Indeed, one of the primary characteristics of this discourse is Blacktavists’ synthesis of complex cultural statements and arguments about Black motherhood into highly condensed images, phrases, and hashtags. Employing this strategy, Blacktavists were able to spread their message quickly and widely.

Tracing social media as a text for analysis is challenging and requires attention to not only what is being said and by whom but who is sharing, “liking,” and reposting these cultural messages. In particular, for online messages to have resonance they must be portable, accessible, and clear—characteristics that Blacktavists’ social media exhibited. Collaborating to repeatedly use certain hashtags (such as #StopMedolac), circulate particular image macros, and link to one another’s online content allowed Blacktavists to maintain control over their message and to center the voices of a generally marginalized community of Black women and mothers. Leaving no doubt as to Blacktavists’ intention to use social media strategically, BMBFA tweeted to one of the individuals commenting about the campaign to stop Medolac: “@blacktavist plz include the hashtag in your posts: it’ll help followers find your tweets #StopMedolac” (BMBFA, 2015a).

Although Blacktavists appear organized and deliberate in their efforts to stop Medolac, their discourses are fragmented, overlapping, and complex. Thus, to assemble a
comprehensive set of texts for analysis, we gathered all of the available online material circulating to halt Medolac’s campaign that we could find. In total, we collected content from 12 individuals or groups who wrote for the campaign across a variety of forums. This network of activists, in less than five months, generated thoughtful commentary responding to Medolac’s initiative, shared one another’s posts on their own social media pages, and collaborated to solicit more than 600 signatures petitioning Medolac to stop its campaign in Detroit.⁹

Tracing their contributions, it is clear that four significant moments, punctuated by particular texts, contour the discursive terrain that we analyzed. These four moments include (a) Medolac’s (2014) official announcement starting its campaign in Detroit; (b) Allers’s (2014) post about Medolac’s campaign in New York Times parenting blog Motherlode; (c) Green’s (2015a) open letter to Medolac, soliciting signatures and asking the company to stop the campaign; and (d) Medolac’s (2015) official announcement resigning the initiative. These discursive touchstones structure Blacktavists’ social media conversation and provide the prompts to which the primary contributors we explore respond. Although there were many other bloggers, Twitter and Facebook users, and online activists to share or link to this content, “like it” on social media, or voice support, we focus our discussion on only those contributors who generated unique content for the Medolac campaign.¹⁰

Exploring Blacktavists’ strategies of visibility

In their efforts to stop Medolac’s exploitation of Black mothers in Detroit, Blacktavists used the Black breastfeeding body intersectionally, collaboratively, and resistively, employing specific rhetorical strategies to manage the mainstream visibility of this population. Highlighting the multiple and interlocking subject locations of Black mothers, sharing and commenting on other Blacktavists’ online content, and rejecting normative culture’s efforts to organize Black motherhood into a rigid social hierarchy that continues to disadvantage minorities, Blacktavists’ efforts successfully halted Medolac’s campaign. In particular, we have identified three rhetorical strategies of visibility used by Blacktavists that demonstrate how these women momentarily managed the normative civic discourses about Black motherhood. These three visibility strategies include (a) demonstrating the historicity of Black labor for White interests, (b) establishing the economic value of that Black labor, and (c) naming whiteness as a racial category. Using examples from the content created and circulated by Blacktavists, we demonstrate how these women used visibility to manage the marginality of the Black breastfeeding body in public discourse and evaluate their ultimate success in stopping Medolac’s campaign.

The historical legacy of Black labor for White interests

In the contemporary United States, many citizens engage in discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism that obscure the ongoing racial inequalities that originated with U.S. systems of slavery. Omi and Winant (2014) explained:

From the very inception of the republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of identity. The hallmark of this history has been racism. (p. 8)
Purportedly, postracism marks the end of racial discrimination and separates interpersonal experiences with racism from the historical, institutional, and structural legacies of racial oppression in the United States (see, e.g., Goldberg, 2002; Joseph, 2012; Squires et al., 2010). Blacktavists, as we demonstrate, resist these imposed silences about race and the subsequent discursive invisibility it creates not only by calling specific attention to their raced bodies but by contextualizing Medolac’s efforts within a historical and ongoing context of racism. Responding to the inception of the company’s campaign, Blacktavists discursively linked Medolac’s efforts to the institution of slavery, making U.S. racism and the exploitation of Black female bodies visible within the “postracial” landscape of the United States.

Within popularly circulating discourses of postracism, Medolac’s efforts to recruit urban African-American women can be read as colorblind and unmotivated by racism; however, Blacktavists’ rhetoric reveals a pattern of Black labor being exploited for White interests and frames Medolac as part of this exploitative pattern. Afrykayn Moon (2015a), in her blog titled View From a Rack, noted:

How does offering to purchase breast milk from African American mothers compare to slavery? Slavery is a legal or economic system under which people are treated as property. Knowing that, the essence of slavery is using people as property, exploiting a group because of their race, economic status or religion for financial gain. Does that ring a bell for you? Medolac is proposing to collect African American women’s milk from low-income areas of Detroit, and sell it to hospitals for seven dollars. That’s a six hundred percent profit made off the backs (or breast in this case) of African American mothers! (para. 5)

Moon’s blog post clearly situates Medolac’s efforts within a much larger historical context of discrimination and oppression, drawing parallels between the company’s use of Black breastfeeding women and slave owners’ use of Black labor. Calling attention to Black bodies, Moon remarks that Medolac is profiting “off the backs (or breast in this case) of African American mothers.” Race scholars have indicated the tension between discursive and material constructions of race, suggesting that embodiment is essential for understanding marginalization (see, e.g., Moraga, 1983). Using this lens we see how Moon, focusing on the materiality of Black mothers’ bodies, moves between the discursive constructions and the material conditions of race to make racism visible on and through the bodies of Black breastfeeding women.

Rendering U.S. histories of racism visible within civic discourses that circulate the myths of postracism and colorblindness, Blacktavists resist and reject being categorized and labeled through White narratives and instead manage how they are seen by providing an intersectional account of the ways their raced, gendered, sexed, and classed bodies have been abused. As executive director of BMBFA and Internet blogger Kiddada Green (2015a) noted, “African American women have been impacted traumatically by historical commodification of our bodies” (para. 3). Similarly, Allers (2015), a consultant for BMBFA and independent blogger, addressing Medolac, articulated, “You disrespected the historical relationship between Black women and white women and our breast milk by not respecting the community enough to reach out to any Black breastfeeding advocates, advisors or organizations in devising your scheme” (para. 2). In both accounts, Green and Allers resist Medolac’s efforts to discursively construct their bodies as commodifiable by calling on the unique intersection of history, race, and gender. Specifically, by rooting their critique within these intersections, Green and Allers frame Black mothers as members of a
supported and sustaining community and make an alternate narrative of Black motherhood visible within public discourse.

Blacktavists’ strategy to link Medolac’s campaign to histories of Black exploitation is articulated discursively as well as represented through powerful visual images, image macros that can shape public discourse and manage the visibility of Black breastfeeding women. Image macros were one Facebook group’s primary contribution to the #StopMedolac campaign. The anonymous organizer(s) of the page “Breastfeeding Mothers Unite” posted a number of image macros during the campaign that were circulated and shared by other Blacktavists across various platforms. Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 were posted as profile pictures to the Breastfeeding Mothers Unite Facebook page and contextualize mothering rhetorics within a complex web of history, race, class, gender, and sexuality. In Figure 1, a drawing of a Black woman nursing a White infant appears in the foreground, while a White woman, presumably the infant’s mother, lies in a comfortable bed in the background of the image in a well-furnished bedroom. Visually representing the legacy of Black women working as wet nurses for their slave-owning mistresses, the image states, “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it” and includes the following: “#StopMedolac from targeting Black mothers in Detroit for breast milk.” This comment directs the viewer to connect slavery-era racial exploitation, a narrative that is banished from contemporary discourses of the postrace era in the United States, to Medolac’s campaign in Detroit.

The relationship between the mistress, the slave, and the nursing child at once relies on embodiment to reinforce the heteronormativity of whiteness, while propagating the marginal sexuality of blackness. This occurs insofar as the White mother, having satisfied reproductive expectations (Carter, 2007), reclines to rest, while the wet nurse bares her Black breast for a White infant. Drawing together cultural expectations of race, gender, sexuality, and social class, this image macro reinforces generalizations of White motherhood as leisurely, privileged, and separated from the physical care of the infant, while Black

![Figure 1](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1.** Drawing of Black woman nursing a White baby in White woman’s bedroom (Breastfeeding Mothers Unite, 2015a).
motherhood is exploited, laborious, and inextricable from satisfying the physical needs of White women and infants. Highlighting the ways that Black female sexuality has been milked for White interests, Blacktavists position Black mothers as hypervisible within a postrace discursive landscape—requiring viewers to not only see race and racist relationships but also the complicit ways that gender, sexuality, and social class inform contemporary racial relationships in the United States.

Image macros based on photographs are also powerful discursive tools used by Breastfeeding Mothers Unite to demonstrate the sexuality of Black motherhood. In Figure 2, a photograph lends credence to Blacktavists’ critiques of exploitation. Using the photograph (a historical document) and Medolac’s logo to censor the Black mother’s bare breasts, the image macro ironically claims “Coming to Detroit! 2015”—a discursive framing that marks the Black breastfeeding woman as a spectacle. Resembling a movie poster advertising an upcoming attraction, Figure 2 relies on irony as a strategy of visibility, whereby Medolac’s logo—apparently controlling the degree to which the Black nursing body will be visible—is also that which renders Black femininity simultaneously hypervisible. By featuring the laboring Black woman satisfying the physical needs of a White infant in the foreground of the image, Blacktavists critique the narrative of excessive Black female sexuality. Specifically, the text that frames the image identifies Medolac as the reason for Black women baring their breasts in public and also as the ironic authority that must then manage this unrestrained display of sexuality—a move reversing the cultural myth that Black femininity is unchecked and dangerous and instead implying that White interests are what have been responsible for framing Black femininity in this way.

As Blacktavists demonstrate, not only is rendering visible the longevity of racist relations important but so too is featuring the Black female body alongside constructions of whiteness and heteronormativity. As Flores (2014) argued:

Race, in all of its messiness, ambiguity, and contestation, lies in/between discursivity and materiality in ways that are (almost) always embodied and lived. That is, despite the fall of

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**Figure 2.** Photograph of Black woman nursing White baby (Breastfeeding Mothers Unite, 2014a).
popularity of scientific and biological theories of race in the early twentieth century, the visible
body retains definitional power in cultural ascriptions of race. (p. 94)

Thus, the circulation of image macros intervenes in contemporary mothering rhetorics,
foregrounding the historical labor of the Black body for White interests, and the compara-
tive embodiment of Black motherhood and disembodiment of White motherhood. Taken
together Blacktavists’ texts make visible “the material existence of ‘colored’ bodies”
(Johnson, 2001, p. 10) and demonstrate the marginality of Black motherhood—a move that
allows Blacktavists to organize public conversations about Black motherhood.

The economic value of Black labor for White interests

During slavery, White families who owned slaves relied on the manual labor of Black men
and women to cultivate their fields, manage their livestock, maintain their property, and
care for their family’s needs—all of which produced a sizable income and a generally
comfortable lifestyle for some White individuals and families. As Blacktavists communi-
cate, Medolac’s predatory campaign to recruit low-income Black mothers to donate their
breast milk is deeply connected to this historical legacy of White people using Black people
for profit. Anayah Sangodele-Ayoka (2015a), who runs the website called Free to Breastfeed
and writes for the blog Moms Rising, explained:

What is the value of breastfeeding? The answer to this question usually includes a rundown of
the myriad health benefits for mothers and children, reduced healthcare costs or the intangible
emotional connection nurtured in the mother–infant dyad. Now, a new program by a
company called Medolac has given it a dollar amount: $1/ounce. (para. 1)

Sangodele-Ayoka and other bloggers go on to problematize the inflated rate at which
Medolac will sell this same product to hospitals desiring a supply of human breast milk
for their patients, at a 600% profit.

Although some White families used the Black breastfeeding body to profit, Blacktavists,
constructing and circulating persuasive appeals to stop Medolac’s campaign, work through
the Black breastfeeding body to assert Black mothers’ agency and to suggest their ability to
control their worth in the marketplace. Figure 3 encapsulates these complaints with a
drawn image of a Black woman exposing her breast to nurse a White infant. This image,
appearing as a profile picture on the Facebook page for Breastfeeding Mothers Unite, is
framed by text that reads:

Why are women always being sold… told that they are doing something of “value”… but
consistently devalued in the process? Once again we are being exploited for a 600% profit.
When you learn how much you’re worth, you’ll stop giving people discounts.

With a deliberate slippage between Black women being “sold” and “told,” this image
macro highlights the profit that Medolac stands to earn from Black breastfeeding women.
To imply Black breastfeeding women do not know their worth or they would not give
discounts resists dominant narratives that Whites control the marketplace, and instead
recenters Black mothers as both capable and responsible for valuing their own labor.

A primary way that Black breastfeeding women are rendered valuable within
Blacktavists’ discourse is through their relationship to heterosexuality. Specifically, within
U.S. contexts, heterosexuality (like whiteness) has social value because its normativity can
translate to varying degrees of influence for those who embody or can approximate this
kind of relationality. As Rand (2013) explained, a framework called the heteroeconomy of
desire structures social relationships, noting, “Heterosexual desire manages resources by
motivating and shaping the consumption of popular culture products, and humans and
identities acquire value directly in relation to the standards of the economy” (p. 131). In
this way, Blacktavists construct a discourse that renders Black breastfeeding women visible
in the consumer marketplace—not as objects/property but as participants within the
heteroeconomy of desire whose worth is calculated based on the complex expectations
for their performances of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Blacktavists’ efforts to render Black breastfeeding women visible as agents within the
U.S. economy are also captured in a second image circulated on the Black Mothers Unite
Facebook page. Figure 4 combines a historical photograph of a Black slave playing “horse”
with a White child, framed by this text: “Medolac is making a 600% profit off the BACKS
of our African American mothers! Selling your breast milk to Medolac will make you
breastfeed longer. If you believe that, I’ve got a bridge you can buy.” The message commu-
nicated in this image macro works through several different logics. The expression “If you
believe that, I’ve got a bridge you can buy” references a turn-of-the-century scam whereby
con artist George Parker attempted to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to people interested in pur-
chasing land (Cohen, 2005). This historical reference equates Medolac’s efforts to those of
an infamous scam artist. In this way, Blacktavists reveal Medolac as untrustworthy and
irresponsible. In particular, the textual part of the image macro addresses Black mothers
as audience members capable of making decisions about how and where to invest their
money and implying that they have the ability to make smarter choices than the woman
in the image or the immigrants who tried to buy the Brooklyn Bridge.

Image macros like those discussed here demonstrate Blacktavists’ efforts to render Black
breastfeeding women visible as audience members and agents with the ability to act on
their own behalf and can be contrasted with other Blacktavists’ image macros that position
Black breastfeeding women as subjects within a profit-driven White industrial machine. In Figure 5, an image macro first appearing on Afrykayn Moon’s blog *View From a Rack* shows a hand-drawn cartoon portraying incapacitated Black women rolling down an infinite conveyor belt where octopus-like tools reach down from above, attaching to the Black women’s breasts to extract milk. The posters hanging on the wall of this illustrated factory show such statements as “We’ll pay for your milk $ $ $,” “Help NICU babies,” and “You can do it.” In this image macro, Blacktavists work through the medium of a political cartoon to make visible the profit that White interests reap from Black bodies and Black labor. Further, this image macro illustrates the embodiment of Black mothers’ oppression and engages the intersectional ways that race, gender, sexuality, and social class collude to erase Black motherhood—consuming it within a heteroeconomy of desire so that Black femininity can benefit some White, procreative, monogamous couples—and making Black women valuable only insofar as they service White, heteronormative sexuality.

Shortly after Medolac announced its campaign in September 2014, and Blacktavists’ discourses began to circulate more widely across social media platforms, Green (2015a) posted an open letter to Medolac in which she solicited signatures of support to stop its campaign. In this letter (one of the four discursive touchstones of this discourse), Green posed a series of questions for Medolac that captured Blacktavists’ concerns that White interests regularly profit from Black bodies and Black labor. She asked:

Why did your company decide to target Detroit, and specifically low-income African-American women within our city? Given the long history in our country of profiting off Black

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**Figure 4.** Photograph of Black woman on hands and knees (Breastfeeding Mothers Unite, 2015b).

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women’s bodies, what steps are you taking to ensure that this process is not exploitative? (Green, 2015a, para. 4)

Though Green communicated her concerns directly to Medolac and provided the company with a specific set of issues she wanted to see addressed, Medolac never provided a response to her questions—something to which we will turn more critical attention in the conclusion. Importantly, Green’s letter, along with other Blacktavists’ image macros, challenges the historical narratives that mark Black bodies as valuable to the U.S. economy only insofar as they benefit White slave owners and White corporate interests. By creating and circulating a variety of texts to center Black mothers as participants within the U.S. economy, Blacktavists resist narratives implying the invisibility of Black motherhood within the U.S. heteroeconomy and manage national mothering rhetorics through strategic uses of visibility. As we will now explore, a final way that Blacktavists managed the visibility of Black motherhood in the public sphere was to make the whiteness against which it has always been measured a visible category within the postrace United States.

**Marking whiteness as a racial category**

Against discourses of U.S. racial formation that have marked and marginalized bodies of color, whiteness has been recognized by scholars as occupying a normative, racial center that is privileged, largely unmarked, and uncritically examined (see, e.g., Garner, 2007; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Because whiteness is the taken-for-granted normative subject location within U.S. discourses, those who benefit from this identity label experience a number of advantages (see, e.g., Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1990). Working against the normative discourses of individuals and institutions invested in maintaining the social position
and capital of whiteness, Blacktavists’ efforts to stop Medolac use rhetorical strategies that make whiteness visible. To do this, they critique the narrative of the “White savior,” as well as deploy a vocabulary of “privilege” to call attention to the unearned advantages of whiteness.

In making whiteness visible as a privileged social location, Blacktavists highlight the complexities of (hyper)visibility and invisibility that marginalize Black motherhood. Kimberly Seals Allers (2015), writing her own open letter to Medolac after Kidadda Green’s correspondence began to circulate, addresses Medolac chief executive officer (CEO) Elena Medo (specifically) and Medolac (generally) as “White saviors.” She remarked:

Please be clear. If you want to help us—then you should talk to us first. It’s a very simple concept. And you seem to be the only one who doesn’t get it. Your arrogance and white saviorism is showing, Ms. Medo. And it isn’t attractive. (Allers, 2015, para. 11)

Allers’s comments charge readers to contextualize Medolac’s efforts within familiar U.S. narratives of magnanimous White people saving disenfranchised people of color who cannot help themselves. Making Elena Medo and Medolac’s whiteness visible, Allers disrupts normative racial discourses by bringing whiteness to the fore to balance the hypervisibility of the Black body, and the invisibility of Black motherhood.

Blogger Afrykayn Moon (2015a) also described Medolac as offering problematic and unwanted aid to Black mothers in Detroit, noting in her blog post, “It’s time for Elena Medo to know she cannot play Savior here without communicating with the people in this community” (para. 27). On a blog radio show several days later, Moon (2015b) reinforced this point, noting, “You can’t save me if you can’t talk to me.” Both Allers’s and Moon’s primary critique of Medolac is that, within and throughout its campaign, Black mothers remained invisible insofar as they had no voice (and no agency) in constructing their futures. Allers’s and Moon’s efforts to frame Elena Medo and Medolac as White saviors, however, disrupt this discursive absence, requiring that Black mothers be visible within this narrative, for the trope of the White savior cannot work without a non-White subject who stands to “benefit” from their efforts.

Blacktavists’ rhetorical efforts to make race visible work against contemporary color-blind attitudes in the United States and call attention to U.S. racism. Allers’s and Moon’s references to the “White savior” directly invoke race as an element of contention; however, their critique of the U.S. racial hierarchy persists in language that references privilege as well. On Allers’s (2014) New York Times parenting blog, Motherlode, the blogger wrote:

Increasing breast-feeding rates among low-income African American women, in Detroit and all over the country, is a goal I support. But there’s more to that effort than numbers. So far, Medolac is taking a very privileged “we know what you need” stance. (para. 10)

A month later, and immediately after Medolac decided to pull its campaign, Green (2015b) responded to the news on the BMBFA website using parallel language in her own post. She remarked:

We have won the battle, but the fight is far from over. We are concerned about Medolac’s hubristic condescension. Medolac’s press release cited a “toxic atmosphere” as their rationale for giving up the Detroit project. They never even agreed to sit down with us, but accuse us of creating a toxic atmosphere? This is the kind of “we know better than you” attitude that started and ended their campaign. (para. 4)
In each of these examples, Blacktavists break out of the pervasive postrace discourses that characterize contemporary U.S. social relations and make race and racism visible in direct and indirect ways. In so doing, Allers, Green, Moon, and others engage in a discursive strategy that depends on rendering the otherwise invisible Black mother and White savior visible within the postracial United States.

As we discuss throughout this analysis, Blacktavists’ strategies reveal that rhetorical reproductions and challenges to the ideological understandings of Black motherhood can come from the margins. Nevertheless, we resist a congratulatory reading of these efforts—especially as lingering concerns about some of the Blacktavists’ choices, as well as questions over the degree to which their efforts truly intervened in larger discourse of discrimination, remain. It is toward these concerns that we now direct our attention.

**Conclusion**

Blacktavists’ use of visibility as a rhetorical strategy worked to halt Medolac’s campaign in Detroit and, for this reason, can be understood as a successful rhetorical effort; however, as we argue, this victory is not without complications. In a press release from Medolac on January 21, 2015, the company explained, “It is with regret that we have taken the unilateral decision to retire this CGI Commitment to Action” (para. 5). Justifying its decision, Medolac directly addressed Blacktavist Kidadda Green, stating:

Thank you for your letter which we received last week. We welcome the chance to correct the misinformation being circulated regarding our Commitment to Action that we announced last September but never had an opportunity to implement. (Medolac, 2015, para. 1)

Thus, even though Medolac retired its campaign in Detroit, the company nevertheless implied that the good work it could have done was unduly stopped by Blacktavists who never gave Medolac the opportunity to actualize its efforts. In this way, Medolac rhetorically constructed a scenario that cast the company’s efforts as “good” and the Blacktavists’ efforts as “bad,” reproducing Black mothering rhetorics that mark Black women as troublemakers, aggressive, and/or pathological (Carpenter, 2012; Reid-Brinkley, 2011; Roberts, 1997).

Black mothering rhetorics reproduce ideological systems of whiteness and heteronormativity and reinforce an existing social hierarchy that maintains the privilege of these particular intersections. Some scholars have noted the significance of the Moynihan Report (published in 1965) in shaping contemporary Black mothering rhetorics, noting that in this report, Black women were charged with the failure, shortcomings, and poverty of the Black family (Carpenter, 2012; Feldstein, 2000; Roberts, 1997). Taken together, the Moynihan Report from the 1960s, contemporary media content, and other public discourses circulating narratives of Black motherhood have long suggested Black women’s shortcomings when measured against the standard of the mythological good White mother (Reid-Brinkley, 2011).

Examining Medolac’s language to retire the campaign demonstrates how the authority of whiteness is used to articulate judgments that represent Black women as difficult troublemakers. The company explains: “In light of recent events … this environment has become too toxic for public/private partnership” in ways that prevent Medolac from seeing
“a viable pathway forward to advance this campaign, particularly given our desire for continued local partner participation” (para. 2). The “recent events” to which Medolac refers are the bevy of Blacktavists’ communication about the company’s campaign—a comment that places responsibility for this campaign’s failure (and the “toxic” environment that was created) squarely on Black women. Medolac’s repeated charges that its campaign in Detroit would help Black mothers and Black children caused a silencing of Black mothers and reinforced their invisibility. When Black mothers and Blacktavists, uninvited, voiced their concerns about the campaign, they were charged with creating a “toxic environment” and labeled difficult community partners who spoiled low-income Black mothers’ opportunity to improve their circumstances. In this way Medolac reproduced Black mothering rhetorics that place blame on Black mothers for the failure of their own communities.

Recognizing the troubled ways in which Medolac framed its campaign’s retirement, Blacktavist Anayah Sangodele-Ayoka (2015b) noted in her blog post that “the coalition behind the public accountability campaign, led by Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association (BMBFA), counts Medolac’s statement as a ‘complicated victory’” (para. 4). At once acknowledging the campaign’s success as well as the normative discourses about Black femininity that linger to position many Black mothers as aggressive and as troublemakers, Sangodele-Ayoka’s statement implies the unfinished work of Blacktavists and the difficulties of producing social change. Indeed, the maternal body is a key site for understanding cultural attitudes about contemporary motherhood (O’Brien Hallstein, 2015); and as Blacktavists’ rhetoric demonstrates, the maternal body of the Black breastfeeding woman is the site of intersecting discourses of identity, power, and subversion. The nexus of Medolac’s and Blacktavists’ discourses reveal the way the body has been used to leverage social control and to advocate for social change. Indeed, managing the visibility of the Black breastfeeding body allowed Blacktavists to challenge Medolac’s exploitation of Black mothers, but does not yet appear to have been successful in revising harmful Black mothering rhetorics that continue to inform the positionality of Black women.

Since halting Medolac’s campaign, Blacktavists continue their efforts to assert a visible place for Black mothers within the public sphere. Afrykayn Moon produces her weekly blog talk-radio show. Anayah Sangodele-Ayoka’s blog posts on Moms Rising continue to center the Black breastfeeding body. Kiddada Green and BMBFA (2015b) continue their work to raise awareness and educate Black women about breastfeeding—implementing a webinar series to “illustrate ways to support, protect and promote breastfeeding within the community” (para 4). With a persistent focus on remaining visible, and advocating for low-income mothers on the margins, Blacktavists will continue to challenge the efforts of groups such as Medolac. Passing on the stories of their achievements, demonstrating the value and limitations of their current strategies, Blacktavists will no doubt keep trying to topple—one post at a time—more than just Medolac; however, for meaningful social change to occur, future efforts must address the normative mothering rhetorics that create initiatives like Medolac’s in the first place.

Acknowledgments

This article, “#SpoiledMilk: Blacktavists, Visibility, and the Exploitation of the Black Breast,” derives from a project initially conceptualized in second author Karen Y. Kimball’s master’s thesis completed in 2008. Since that time, this essay was developed to further elaborate and theorize the intersections
of race, gender, and sexuality inherent in her original project on breastfeeding. The authors thank Jeff Bennett for his generous feedback, Jennifer Aglio for her copyediting assistance, and the staff at Prairie House Restaurant in Cross Roads, Texas, for the wonderful workspace and killer food.

Notes

1. The term Blacktavist is a colloquial expression adopted by women advocating for increased breastfeeding initiation rates in the Black community. The expression is a blend of the terms Black and activist and references the common phrase lactavist.

2. We use the term refracting to suggest the ways that our analysis shifts and/or bends as it is considered within and/or alongside multiple intersecting subject positions.

3. We use the term governmentality to describe the way the state exercises control, established by Michel Foucault in his 1977–1978 lecture series Security, Territory, Population (Foucault, Senellart, Ewald, Fontana, & Davidson, 2009).

4. Medolac defines itself as a public benefit corporation.

5. Because of the various positions of marginality that all people may experience, individuals are often simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged (relative to social class, gender performativity, sexuality, race, able-bodiedness, and so on); such is the case for the White mothers and the Black mothers we talk about throughout this article.

6. For a comprehensive accounting of this work, see Chávez and Griffin’s (2012) collection, Standing at the Intersections of Feminism, Intersectionality, and Communication Studies.

7. Image macros are images which often appear with text and which communicate cultural concepts that are shared publicly by users across Internet platforms.

8. The hashtag #StopMedolac was used 107 times by 44 unique Twitter users over the course of 21 days, often in conjunction with other hashtags—among them #BlackLivesMatter, which was used alongside #StopMedolac in 12 separate instances. Although Blacktavists used multiple hashtags, the title of our article, #SpoiledMilk, was not circulated by Blacktavists in their efforts to stop Medolac’s campaign but is rather something with which we took creative license to capture and support Blacktavists’ critique.

9. These activists appear to come from diverse backgrounds. Some are mothers who, through their own experiences, have become involved online to share struggles, successes, and tips about breastfeeding. Others are lactation consultants, and still others are directly linked to (or work for) organizations committed to empowering mothers to make their own informed decisions about parenting, breastfeeding, and health.

10. The primary contributors referenced include Blacktavists Kiddada Green, Kimberly Seals Allers, Afrykayn Moon, Anayah Sangodele-Ayoka, Danielle Atkinson, Jodine Chase, and Liz Brooks; Breastfeeding Mothers Unite; Breastfeeding Coalition of Oregon; Rose Incorporated; Health Connect One; and Harambee.

11. Medolac is referencing the letter Kidadda Green wrote on January 12, 2015, that solicited signatures from other individuals concerned that the company was taking advantage of low-income Black women in Detroit.

References


Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association. (2015a, January 18). @blactavist plz include the hashtag in each of your posts: It'll help followers find your tweets #StopMedolac [tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BMBFA/status/556910028427628545


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