“Don't Risk Disaster”: Early Advertisements for Contraceptives in American Periodicals

Peace scholar Johann Galtung wrote a theory that critically analyzes concepts of peace and violence. One of his many distinguished definitions of violence includes structural violence, which in opposition to personal violence, extends beyond the scale of individuals into harm that is systemized and institutionalized within human societies (Galtung 171). An example of structural violence can be found in oppressive patriarchal societies like the United States. In such a society, “attempts to control fertility depend on social factors as much as on research,” making access to contraceptive drugs depend as much on social norms as on more practical factors like socioeconomics, legalization, and the progress of science. Inhibitors to access to these drugs disproportionally affect women and people with uteri (Quarini 28). For example, in the pioneering days of birth control in the United States, individuals were arrested simply for writing about birth control methods for women, and reproduction and the associated responsibilities were “portrayed as a distinctly female task” (Quarini 28; Tone 156). In a culture that actively inhibits women’s access to contraceptives, signifiers of an inequitable—and structurally violent—balance between genders can become glaringly obvious even in small corners of newspapers. Advertisements in these periodicals reify the capitalist structure that maintains patriarchy. In one such advertisement found in the December 9th, 1950, issue of *The Afro-American*, the Personal Drug Company makes strong claims about a contraceptive capsule that uses the “Quick-Kaps” formula to “relieve [consumers] of their biggest worry” (Figure 1). This small advertisement—being a mysterious representation of others—is an example of how advertisements for contraceptives in American periodicals in the first half of the twentieth century perpetuated and attempted to capitalize on the structural violence that occurred against women’s health.

After the Great Depression and the end of the World Wars, “Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s leapt eagerly into domesticity and consumerism,” and economic growth promoted the congruous increase in the size of families (Watkins 9). During this period, Americans married and had children as quickly as they could, and thus “the marriage rate reached an all-time high and the average age at which people married dropped to an all-time low” (9). Data comparing the fertility rates of three cohorts of American women (born in either 1910, 1935, or 1960) shows that of the women born in 1935 (who would have reached their age of fertility by 1950), 70% of them gave birth to their first child while under the age of 25—the average age at the time of their first birth being 21 years old (Kirmeyer 1). While the average number of children for this cohort was 3 per woman (the highest of the three cohorts), 35% had four or more children, and this was “the most frequent outcome” (1).

With fertility rates being so high, the prospect of unmitigated fertility would have presented a problem to many women. The National Center for Health Statistics says that “the lives of women who become mothers are significantly different from those who do not,” and whether a person gives birth affects their economic capacity and “may impose costs for the mother in terms of personal and professional options” (Kirmeyer 1). Many women feared “that if they went forward with [a] pregnancy and gave birth but lacked the resources to care for the child, they might be targets of child welfare officials, [and] charged with neglect (Solinger 97). Perhaps realizing this, many wrote to the government agency the Children’s Bureau (an office of the Administration for Children and Families from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) “about wanting to keep their husbands’ love but needing to curb their fertility” (97). Considering the risk to their health in addition to their socioeconomic status, these writers complained that they had become “ill, exhausted, [and] old before their time” under the pressure

of such frequent pregnancies (97). Most did not receive helpful replies from the Bureau, if any (97).

After the turn of the century, standard conventions of American birthing practices were going through a period of change. After the emergence of the medical profession, "whose mostly male practitioners sought to take control over the process of pregnancy and birth from midwives and lay healers," occurred in the late nineteenth century, a phenomenon called the "mystification of medical knowledge" happened (May 16; Kaplan). Through this phenomenon, the traditional reliance on female social networks for natal care broke down, replaced by a sterilized process controlled by men and taking place in hospitals instead of homes (Kaplan). Women began to believe that "the promise of 'science' could alleviate dangers and fears surrounding childbirth," and they put their trust wholeheartedly in their male physicians (Kaplan). Despite this trust, women now had less autonomy in their own natal care and birthing process, and "through the 1940s, hospital births frequently left women disillusioned and terrified, often contributing to psychiatric distress for extended periods after delivery" (Kaplan).

The Food and Drug Administration approved its first contraceptive pill in 1960, and before then the methods of birth control available to people with uteri looked much different (Tone 81). The two most effective methods of artificial birth control available to American women in the 1950s were the diaphragm (used in tandem with spermicidal jelly) and the male condom (Watkins 11). Unfortunately, both methods required the approval of a male counterpart: to get a diaphragm, "a woman had to ask her physician to fit and prescribe one for her, which meant in essence she had to ask him for permission to plan her family," and of course the use of the male condom required the consent of that party (11). Still, by 1942 there were more than eight hundred birth control clinics open and available to women across the nation (May 20). In

the same year the Birth Control Federation of America (founded in part by Margaret Sanger) changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America with the goal of "strengthening the family by making it possible to plan the timing and spacing of children and by liberating female sexuality in marriage" (20). However, one of the biggest inhibitors to access to contraceptive drugs was the Comstock Law of 1873 which placed "the U.S. Post Office in charge of finding and censoring all 'obscene' information passing through the mail" (Solinger 71). This law, championed by "moral reformer" Anthony Comstock, could fine someone up to $500 or imprison them in a labor camp for up to ten years for sending "obscene material, including information about preventing pregnancy, through the mail," and influenced the decisions of newspaper editors of the early 20th century (Solinger 72; Tone 157). It wasn't until *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965 that the Supreme Court "declared that a constitutional right to privacy for married couples fell within the 'penumbra' of the Bill of Rights—understood in this context to be the right to matrimonial privacy in the bedroom, including the use of contraceptives. It would take seven more years before the Supreme Court guaranteed the same rights to *unmarried* individuals" (Tone 238).

The creators of the advertisement from the Personal Drug Co. carefully selected language that would be attractive to vulnerable women in desperate situations. The ad begins in large all-capitalized letters with the text, "PERIOD DELAYED? (Overdue)," and continues in a smaller font, "Don't risk disaster. Don't worry" (Fig. 1). The use of the strongly connotated word "disaster" seems targeted to the fears the intended audience of this ad would have had at the time. Assuming the target audience is cisgender women, there could be many reasons for them to relate to and be persuaded by the foreboding language used here. Besides concerns for her socio-economic status, there is the concern a woman has for her own health when faced with a pregnancy. The state of contemporary childbirth practices as it was following the mystification of medical knowledge, having so many children at such a young age would have been a

challenging reality to face. When women did not receive any helpful correspondence in return from their pleas to the Children's Bureau, or any government agency, they turned to using whatever they could to end a pregnancy, including "knitting needles and crochet hooks, hairpins, scissors, or a bone stay from a corset" (Solinger 97). The dire—and sometimes fatal—consequences of self-induced abortion disproportionally affected women who were unmarried, impoverished, and/or women of color, but all women would have been familiar with the prospective reality reference to, by the advertisement's use of the word, "disaster" (Solinger 97; Fig. 1). As women became more desperate to find a solution to "their biggest worry," as the Personal Drug Company calls it, they turned to advertisements found in the newspaper. Advertisements like this one "preyed on and compounded women's fears of pregnancy to reap higher profits," and thus benefited from the structural violence women feared in their daily domestic lives (Tone 157).

With unknowable origins and vague euphemisms used about contraceptives, this ad resembles trends used in many other ads in the early days of birth control pills and reflects the secretive nature of accessibility to contraceptives—and the knowledge thereof. The bottom text of the ad includes instructions on how to purchase and receive the contraceptive product by mail, the name of the company, and an associated address in New York City (Fig. 1). Mysteriously, the information available about the Personal Drug Company or the Quick-Kaps formula which were advertised in multiple issues of *The Afro-American,* is slim to none. The emphasis of the product being delivered to consumers "packed in a confidential box" is possibly due to the restrictions of the Comstock Law, but also would have been meant to entice women who perhaps lived with a spouse or a family that did not approve of what Anthony Comstock would have called 'unnatural' or 'undignified' methods of birth control (Fig. 1; Tone 13). The topic of birth

control necessitated discretion, so historically, with the restrictions of the Comstock Law in place, "advertisements for contraceptives used euphemisms such as 'effective for female disorders,' or contained warnings that 'special care should be taken not to use the remedy after certain exposure has taken place, as its use would almost certainly prevent conception'" (May 16). In this ad for the Personal Drug Company, similar care has been taken to avoid any explicit mention of the desire to abort an unwanted pregnancy. For example, the ad insinuates that its consumers are seeking a solution simply for a "minor functional menstrual delay or borderline anemia," the cause of the menstrual delay not necessarily being a pregnancy (Fig. 1). If some magazines and papers would not accept "'the advertising of any product which in the copy claims to be, directly or indirectly, a contraceptive,'" for fear of moral backlash from their readers, then it would follow that companies like the Personal Drug Co. would have chosen to use misleading language in their advertisements for contraceptives (Tone 157).

However, the euphemistic nature of the ad, and others like it, could have caused women to make misled or misinformed decisions about their own reproductive health. While periodicals would not accept advertisements of products claiming to be contraceptives, they "were content to pocket the revenue from ads for less-effective feminine hygiene products, which their readers bought for the same purpose" (Tone 157). The Personal Drug Company claims that its product is "medically recognized," "doctor approved," and "scientifically prepared," but none of these phrases hold much credibility, having very little meaning. The first birth control pill sanctioned by the Food and Drug Administration was "recognized" and "approved" in 1960, so this pill from 1950 could not have gone through the Administration's federally regulated vetting process (Personal Drug Co.; Tone 81). The ad also states, "At last—it can be sold," in reference to the formula for this capsule (Fig. 1). If more information was available about the "Quick-Kaps" formula, it might have been possible to determine what exactly prevented the formula from being

sold earlier. Without this information, one can only guess at this mysterious product's origins. It is possible that this formula was not as reliable as it claimed to be and that the pill did have "harmful after effects," as it denied it did, since it was not implausible at the time for "print and radio ads and commissioned door-to-door salespeople [to manipulate] women's anxieties [in order] to hawk goods that were useless as contraceptives and dangerous to women's health" (Personal Drug Co.; Tone 157). Even in the absence of direct harm to a consumer's body, advertisements still promoted ineffective or unreliable products "under the guise of medical science," and with the promise of "the latest advances in contraceptive technology," leaving consumers with the same problem that had led them to buy a product in the first place (Tone 157). With this pinhole focus on profit, contraceptive companies—or rather, companies that claimed to be selling contraceptives—put the health and well-being of their consumers at risk through actively misleading marketing.

Through fear tactics that preyed on women in precarious circumstances, by using misleading language in order to skirt the Comstock Law, and by promoting and selling ineffective and/or dangerous alternatives under the guise of real contraceptives, drug companies in the first half of the twentieth century took advantage of the structurally vulnerable position that American women with unwanted pregnancies found themselves in. Through carefully chosen language, the Personal Drug Company did the same with their ad in *The Afro-American.* Without the help of government agencies, their male physicians, or their disbanded female social networks from before the emergence of the medical field, and with the active interference of the law, information about and access to birth control was difficult to attain for American women in the 1950s, and this "effectively prevented women from controlling their fertility" (Watkins 12). Although the advertisement from the Personal Drug Company is small and almost forgotten by

history, it is an appropriate example of the ways in which the efforts of capitalism and patriarchy often collaborate to maintain a structurally violent American society, offering options and information to consumers via ulterior motives. Although the issue of the ongoing history of contraceptives sits within a vastly larger conversation about the use of contraceptives within a eugenic narrative (which disproportionally targets people of color, the disabled, and the impoverished), it should be considered through a lens that is critical to the messages members of a structurally violent society receive through marketing and advertising.

Appendix

PERIOD DELAYED?
(Overdue)
DON'T RISK DISASTER
DON'T WORRY

At last—it CAN BE SOLD, a new, extra effective Doctor approved formula—"Quick-Kaps" capsules may relieve you of your biggest worry — when due to minor functional menstrual delay or borderline anemia. Scientifically prepared by registered Pharmacists "Quick-Kaps" capsules contain only medically recognized drugs having no harmful after effects—Complete supply—packed in a confidential box only $5.00. Send no money and we will mail C.O.D. plus small postal and C.O.D. charges or send $5.00 cash and we will rush AIR MAIL "Just the thing to have on hand."

Available only from
PERSONAL DRUG CO.
6 Hester St. Dept. 6, New York 2, N.Y.

Figure 1. Advertisement from Personal Drug Co. appearing in the December 9th, 1950 issue of *The Afro-American.*

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