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ABSTRACT

Focusing on mainstream and tabloid news reporting and ancillary texts, this article analyses the media presentation of Meghan Markle's intersectional identities through a rhetoric of the feuding famous family. We argue that the media discourse centred on family conflict and domestic drama used to characterise Markle's position as a royal during the Brexit era both surfaces and suppresses the significance of her existential challenge to the normative racial, class, national and gendered attributes associated with British royalty. That discourse also obfuscates and trivializes the power struggle over the significant economic capital and political "soft power" associated with the British Royal Family brand.

Introduction

Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, was hailed as Britain's "first [B]lack princess" (Iman M. Mahfouz 2018) and proclaimed the nation's second "mixed race royal" (DeNeen L. Brown 2017). Already famous when she met Prince Henry of Wales in 2016 because of her starring role on *Suits* (2011–17), Markle catapulted into the global celebrity elite during their courtship and acquired royal status when they married in 2018. Her American middle class background, biracial (also referred to as mixed race) African American heritage, television celebrity, and status as a divorced woman, all elements of her intersectional identity, came to inform the international media's treatment of her as a -modern day Cinderella and a "disruptive duchess" (Kim. Brunhuber 2020). In this article, we consider "disruptive" duchessing to be a trope through which Markle was branded a problematic upstart and illegitimate outsider in the British Royal Family during the Brexit era (2015–2020). The terminology of disruption introduces a not-so veiled racism through the longstanding trope of Angry Black Women, considered "irrational, crazy, out of touch, entitled, disruptive, and not team players" (Brittany Cooper 2018). Entitlement, irrationality and disruption animate years of press accounts of Markle's relationship with the British Royal Family, including the volley of negative media that emerged in response to Markle and Windsor's interview with Oprah Winfrey in March, 2021.

We focus on three controversies, each one representing an important moment not only in Royal Family life, but in family life more generally: a wedding, the birth of a child, and a legal separation. The reporting and meme-ing that developed around these controversies invariably present Markle as the source of domestic conflict within a family system in which she is a perpetual interloper.

This discourse has broad political implications. The British Royals explicitly link nation and family, using symbolism appealing to "deeply atavistic longings for a great and united nation, a sense of harmony in national heritage and a belief in the stability and continuity of family life" (Rosalind Brunt 1992, 288). Domesticity remains central to representations of the Royal Family, where motherhood and marriage continue to circumscribe and regulate women's roles (Raka Shome 2001).

In the case of Meghan Markle, the domestic controversies that diverse media channels have fixed upon are both manufactured and meaningful; they both divert and disclose. They speak to the way Markle, a feminist, biracial, American media celebrity, challenges the fundamental premises of a white European ruling dynasty whose legitimacy rests on genetic lineage and "good breeding." The challenges Markle poses are real, yet they are constantly deflected and deformed in ways that minimize their import, as concerns about racial and gendered assumptions relating to British national identity are displaced onto family drama.

When Markle and Windsor's engagement was announced in 2017, the British tabloid *The Spectator* disparaged their "union of royalty and showbiz," and pronouncing Markle unsuitable because she was divorced. By raising divorce as an obstacle after it had been overlooked in 2005 when heir-apparent Prince Charles was granted leave to marry Camilla Parker-Bowles, the press amplified comparisons between Markle and Wallis Simpson, the divorced American woman whose rejection as a royal consort prompted King Edward VIII's abdication in 1936 (Melanie McDonagh 2017; Michael Rosenwald 2020). This metonymic association presents Markle as a threat to the very institution of the monarchy, but for the fairly innocuous reasons of celebrity and divorce. *The Telegraph*, announced the engagement with a headline whose explicit violence overshadowed the article's seeming attempt to proclaim Markle's legitimacy by tracing her heritage to royalty: "King Henry VIII Ordered for [sic] Meghan Markle's Ancestor to be Beheaded" (Hannah Furness 2017). This moment foreshadows the tabloid press's ambivalent, aggressive treatment of Markle in the years to come.

Markle's "disruptive" duchessing occurred within a historical context that witnessed a broad reassessment of British identity through the Brexit process and through an increasingly critical stance toward the crown and its post-Elizabethan future. On the eve of Markle and Windsor's wedding, *Time* reported that British taxpayers were spending 468 USD million a year on the monarchy (Graham Smith 2018). Concerns about the massive wealth and perks that royals enjoy have surfaced for decades, and especially after 1992, when taxpayers were asked to fund the restoration of a fire-damaged Windsor Castle. For very different reasons, the 1997 death of the Diana Spencer, the "people's princess," brought added scrutiny and condemnation. The significance of Diana's life and death for the media's representation of the British Royal Family, examined by Jim. McGuigan 2000, Raka Shome (2001) and W.J. Brown, M.D. Basil and M.C. Bocarnea 2003 among others, exceeds the scope of this essay, but nevertheless informs media depictions of Markle in ways that we discuss below.

Aware of its public image, the Royal Family has made calculated gestures toward greater transparency—opening Buckingham Palace to visitors, for example, using the income to refurbish Windsor Castle. At the same time, media outlets in the US and Britain have courted audiences with films such as *Mrs. Brown* (1997), *Victoria and Albert* (2001), *The Queen* (2006), *Young Victoria* (2009), *The King's Speech* (2010), *Victoria* (2016), *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (2018) and television series such as *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-), *The Windsors* documentary series (CNN 2020) and *The Windsors* comedy series (BBC/Netflix, 2016-). This trend demonstrates that Markle could not bring "showbiz" to the Windsors, as alleged, because the monarchy had already been thoroughly "commodifed by the media as well as by the Royal Family itself" (Shi. Tongyun 2009), the intensification of a process that began with Queen Elizabeth's televised coronation in 1953.

The nature of Markle's pre-existing fame has exposed the terms of British Royal celebrity. She enjoyed recognition as a star, a feminist and a humanitarian prior to her involvement with Windsor, writing on her lifestyle blog *Tig* that she sought to "integrate social consciousness and subjects of higher value than selfies" (Meghan Markle 2016). Her desire to use her "earned" celebrity for social causes treads on territory claimed by the Royal Family, drawing attention to the discrepancy between her Hollywood-derived fame and their "ascribed" celebrity. Their inherited prominence may confer an "automatic respect and veneration" (Graeme Turner 2014, 106); increasingly, however, "royalty today has to earn the respect of their subjects" (Michael Billig 2004, 71). In fact, "the maintenance of an explicitly elite hereditary institution within a democratic state requires some management and the offering of individual members for consumption as celebrities has been one of the strategies employed" (Graeme Turner 2014, 106). Markle stands as a reminder that the source of the Windsors' celebrity is heredity, not talent or charisma or hard work, which may heighten the scrutiny of privileges they enjoy at taxpayers' expense.

Given the political, governmental, symbolic, and economic significance of the monarchy, it's not surprising that Markle, the Royal Family, and the press have clashed over the control of her image, particularly during the Brexit era. Political and economic withdrawal from the European Union represents a "turn to an inward nationalism" inflamed by "wider cognate anxieties regarding race and ethnicity" (Sivamohan Valluvan and Virinder S. Kalra 2019, 2394). If the British Royal family serves as the ultimate expression of the imagined white "Little England" Brexiteers sought to protect against the EU's commitment to the free movement of people, then Markle, an emblem of feminist, multiracial and multicultural possibility, serves as its counterpoint. In short, she complicates the family portrait.

Eager to capitalise internationally on Markle's image as an emblem of feminism, postracialism and postnationalism, however, the Royal Family dispatched her and Windsor to Ireland, Morocco, Australia, Fiji, Tonga, New Zealand, South Africa, Malawi and Angola as Commonwealth Youth Ambassadors in 2019, in an attempt to "set themselves apart from [...] other forms of patriarchy and to mask, or at least deflect attention from, their own intensely problematic relationship with issues of race, gender, class and religion" (Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin 2018, 374). In this way, Markle's image was harnessed to rebrand the British monarchy for the 21st century.

In what follows, we analyse the media discourse highlighting the challenges Markle poses to the British Royal Family, building upon work by John M.T. Balmer, Stephen

A. Greyser and Mats Urde 2004 that argues the monarchy is both a political institution and a corporate brand, with its own international "heritage-based brand tribe" (Cele C. Otnes and McLaren Pauline 2011, 66). A growing body of scholarly literature on Markle valuably analyses the intersectional identities upon which her global celebrity rests (Kehinde Andrews 2021; Clancy et al. 2018; Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin 2021; Iman M. Mahfouz 2018; Myra Washington 2020; Eve Woldemikael and Olivia Woldemikael 2021; Nicole Willson 2021; Hannah Yelin and Michele Paule 2021).

Existing analyses fail to address the dominant narrative the media used to characterize Markle as a "disruptive duchess," however. The overarching construct through which Markle's cultural meanings have been channelled is a familial discourse; more specifically, the rhetoric of the famous, feuding family. This trope, a staple of reality television, sitcoms and game shows, is flexible enough to enable the critique of the inherited status of royalty while at the same time decrying Markle's disruption of it.

Feuding famous families

On the face of it, Markle has discharged her royal duties in ways that the most traditional royal observer might find admirable. She relinquished her career as a television star, gave birth to a male heir, and served alongside her husband as Britain's global ambassador. But from the earliest days of her association with Windsor, the news media deployed narratives of family conflict to signal Markle's illegitimacy and to contain her "disruptive" identities within a discourse of family conflict.

Feuding famous family narratives are informed by decades of tabloid press and reality television and function to both surface and suppress the political and ideological challenges that Markle poses to the monarchy. Markle's "disruptive duchessing" may indeed involve a family feud, but its significance lies not in the discovery that royals are "norm-core plutocrats" (Jo. Littler 2018) who disagree with one another, "just like us," as magazine headlines tout. Markle's challenge to the Royal Family brand, we contend, must be situated within a context where wealthy families of the global elite serve as a key locus of political power in an increasingly anti-democratic era. Furthermore, containing Markle's challenges to inherited privilege within narratives of domestic drama downplays the ways her intersectional identities and humanitarian work enable her to speak to structural racism and gendered inequality on a global stage.

The family has become the pivotal framework for representing Markle for obvious reasons: first, her celebrity is based upon her membership by marriage in a Royal Family that is a political and cultural institution. Endowed with a corporate inflection through its nickname, "The Firm" (Penny Junor 2014; Clancy et al. 2021), the Royal Family is "the ultimate establishment of British national patriarchy" (Raka Shome 2001, 324), a disciplinary apparatus for white, heteronormative coupling. In recent years, Prince William's and Kate Middleton's assertively "heteronormative family values [. . .] revitalise[d] the monarchy as an institution of public interest and constitutional legitimacy" (Holly Randell-Moon 2017). Moreover, the "celebritisation of constitutional monarchy" helps to obscure the racial and religious dynamics that underpin its power in Britain's settler colonies (Holly Randell-Moon 2017), which feature heavily among the Commonwealth nations whose floral emblems Markle incorporated into the design of her wedding veil, a move much lauded in women's magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Glamour* (Krystin

Arneson 2018). In the documentary *Queen of the World* (ITV/HBO 2018), whose title refers to Queen Elizabeth, Markle reports that the entire Royal Family were "over the moon to find out that I would make this choice." These nations were locations Markle and Windsor visited in 2019.

As this analysis suggests, the British Royal Family serves as a locus of Britain's "soft power," defined as a nation's ability to persuade without force or coercion and viewed as a necessary element for the successful navigation of post-Cold War geopolitics (Joseph S. Nye 1990, Joseph S. Nye 2004). A 2014 British Council study entitled "As Others See Us: Culture, Attraction and Soft Power," documents the fact that the "arts and culture" sector has become the largest attraction for international visitors to Britain and reports that Queen Elizabeth places second, after Shakespeare, on the list of names most often cited in tourism surveys (Kieron Culligan, John Dubber and Mona Lotten 2014). In these surveys, "The Royal Family" was the most popular answer to a question asking what the UK should be proud of.

The Queen's proximity to Shakespeare in survey responses notwithstanding, the contemporary understanding of families—famous, infamous, royal or obscure—is strongly informed by tabloid and reality television, from Jerry Springer and Jeremy Kyle to *An American Family, The Osbournes, Jon and Kate Plus 8, 19 Kids and Counting, Little People, Big World* and *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (referred to as reality TV royalty). These anti-meritocratic dynasties, though far from royal, are often associated with lucrative international business empires. The family unit represented by reality TV both foregrounds and masks ideologies of class, gender and race within a sentimentalizing rhetoric of bonded kinship. Television families not only "provide ways of thinking about gender and sexuality" but also relate viewers to "larger contexts like citizenship and national identity" (Leigh H. Edwards 2010). Thus, "television families are the sites of cultural anxieties, where the work of social cohesion is ritually enacted' (Derek Kompare 2004). The British Royal Family is a perhaps an extreme case: a family explicitly, even ceremonially, meant to model social cohesion with the aim of neutralizing differences of gender, race and class in the interests of its own self-preservation and a wider sense of national identity and cultural stability.

Meghan Markle's "disruptive" incorporation into the royal family occurred under the aegis of a feuding famous family discourse. The discourse adopts stardom discourses: merging the ordinary (marital and filial relations) and extraordinary (fame, wealth, beauty). Famous families assume a larger social significance and recirculate "normative representations" or "models for real individuals and families to identify with and (ostensibly) emulate" (Derek Kompare 2004). Reality television families are prescriptive as well as descriptive; their "reality" an "engrossing spectacle of actions and reactions" (Derek Kompare 2004).

Family Feud, the British Royal Family Edition, has dominated news coverage of Meghan Markle, highlighting and undermining her claims to belonging in Brexit-era Britain. We analyse three media events—the 2018 royal wedding, the 2019 birth of Markle and Windsor's son Archie, and their 2020 decision to withdraw from formal royal duties, known as Megxit—as key to the discourse of Markle's "disruptive duchessing." Each one signifies a rite of passage in the development of a family system, and yet is heightened due to the context: a (royal) wedding, the birth of a child (and potential heir), and a legal separation (and relinquishing of titles). At each pivotal moment, Markle's differences are

marked and treated as disruptive to family unity. Implicit in this domestic discourse, however, are the more provocative challenges Markle poses to the white national identity historically associated with the monarchy and linked to the Brexit Vote Leave campaign, whose motto was "take back control."

Method

We used the LexisNexis newspaper database to search for articles pertaining to "Meghan Markle" and found that clusters of content arose around three major historical events: the royal wedding, the birth of Archie, and Meghan and Harry Winsdor's exit, also known as Megxit. Given the multitude of articles this search identified, we generated a more specific dataset by using a time filter for each event to confirm that the coverage was current in relation to each respective event. We also used the search term "Meghan Markle" in relation to each of the three events: "Meghan Markle" and "Royal Wedding," filtered to articles from May 12 to May 26, 2018; "Meghan Markle" and "pregnancy," filtered to articles from April 29 to May 20, 2019 and "Meghan Markle" and "Megxit," filtered to articles from January 9 to January 24, 2020.

We selected the first 30 articles from each search as part of the sampling procedure, arriving at a total of 90 articles. We employed discourse analysis to analyse the contents of the articles, which revealed the repeated pattern of narratives of familial conflict. Discourse analysis looks for patterns and interprets repeated structures in terms of the relationships they engender and the sociocultural practices they are associated with (Norman Fairclough 2013). Using discourse analysis offers flexibility by affording several approaches to answering research questions (Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer 2001). In this instance, our initial question, "what are the terms through which Markle's duchessing has been presented as disruptive?" was answered first by the breakout of articles according to three family events and second by the repetition of family conflict as a prominent theme (often in headlines). When social media memes were included in or referenced by the articles we sourced, we used them to inform and flesh out our discussion.

The data set for this study is relatively small, which was expected, given the short time period under consideration and the parameters in place. The sample size nonetheless facilitates the research goal of identifying dominant narratives that emerged around Meghan Markle during the period in which she was identified as a "disruptive" addition to the British Royal Family.

The royal wedding: family drama and salacious sexuality

When Markle began dating Windsor in 2016, she became such a popular target of the British press that he was prompted to publicly decry their tactics, denouncing "the racial undertones of comment pieces" and the "outright sexism and racism of social-media trolls" (Royal UK. 2016). The British tabloids, the wider press, and social media churned out narratives related to Markle's race, sexuality and family relationships that underscored her unsuitability as a royal. *The Star* criminalised her Blackness by characterising her solidly middle class, suburban Los Angeles upbringing as "ghetto": the story, entitled "Harry to marry into gangster royalty: new love from crime-ridden neighbourhood" (Louise Berwick 2016) compared crime statistics in the Crenshaw district of South Central LA—although

Markle grew up in the San Fernando Valley (Leslie Carroll 2018)—to Highgrove, the rural Gloucestershire estate where Harry Windsor spent his childhood.

Windsor and Markle may have contributed to the monarchy's "greatest contemporary act of renewal" (Afua Hirsch 2018), but they faced an ambivalent public response that rendered the event a "romantic fairy tale, change of tradition and racial slur" (Afua Hirsch 2018). The social media response on Facebook was equally divided. While Markle "spurred pride in African American British citizens" and among women, a vociferous anti-Markle contingent disparaged the Duchess-apparent as a "divorced opportunist unworthy of royal status because of her biracial and American middle class background" (Iman M. Mahfouz 2018).

Before the wedding, the tabloids elicited evidence of a salacious sexuality—explicitly unsuitable for a woman royal—from Markle's divorce and her career as a model and actor. British tabloids presented Markle as a promiscuous femme fatale. Describing her as "Prince Harry's 'saucy divorcee,' [they] said she had engaged in 'raunchy snaps' and suggested she might have still been dating an ex-boyfriend when she met Harry" (Iliana Magra 2020). This sexual stigmatising of Markle must be contextualised within the long history of the pathologising of the bodies and sexualities of women of colour (Joel R. Anderson, Joel R. Anderson, et al. 2018) including the infamous case of Sarah Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman who spent years on display in early 19th century London as the "Hottentot Venus" because of her large buttocks. The Jezebel stereotype —"a hypersexual, seductive and manipulative slave woman" (Brown et al. 2003)—has persisted across centuries, reappearing in reality television (Tia. Tyree 2011).

The "raunchy snaps" piece from *The Sun* established the comparative approach the press and social media would use to pit Markle against her sister-in-law Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge. The fictitious narrative of the never ending "catfight" between duelling duchesses would prove durable for tabloids, mainstream news media and social media in the years to come. Middleton would be cast as the demure white foil against which Markle was measured; initially, on the grounds of sexual allure and appropriateness, with the criteria later extending to maternal adequacy. Though born a commoner like Markle, Middleton was presented as the archetypal Princess, one who apparently believed "a woman's happiness is dependent on marrying her "prince," and [. . .] the keys to this goal are a femininity defined by innocence, passivity, submissiveness, and, above all, beauty' (JoAnn Conrad 1997).

At best, as social memes created at the time of the wedding demonstrate, Markle's claims to princesshood rested on her mimicry of Cinderella (Figure 1), the iconic white princess, who, along with two Disney princesses of colour, Mulan and Tiana, rise from obscurity. At worst, Markle would be denigrated as an abject outsider who needed to be compared unfavorably with her sister-in-law or her deceased mother-in-law to police her ego, appearance and propriety. The misogynist practice of rating women's comparative attractiveness is not new—it's how Facebook was born—but here it possesses an intergenerational reach. One meme circulating years after the wedding compared Middleton's and Markle's legs to those of the long-dead Diana Spencer, another "fairytale" princess (Lucy Butler 1982), who was actually born into the royal family. Posthumously, Diana has functioned as an even more potent symbol of the untouchable white femininity central to the "symbolic reproduction of national patriarchy" (Raka Shome 2001) than she had during her life (Figure 2). In the comparison with her daughters-in-law, the practically non-

Figure 1. Royal Wedding meme: Markle as Cinderella.

Figure 2. Meme Comparing Diana, Middleton and Markle.

existent variation among the legs of three thin, fit, wealthy young women generates the absurd categories of "great," "to die for" and "affront to the field of vision."

The trope of comparing women royals as a policing gesture was in full force prior to Markle's arrival. Middleton's original foil was her sister Philippa (Pippa), whose backside, a contender for "rear of the year" (Hilary Moss 2011), became a *cause celebre* by "nearly upstaging [Kate]" during her wedding (Janet McCabe 2011). "The fetishism of Pippa Middleton," writes Gavin Gavin Wilkinson 2015, not only symbolise[d] a disrupted conceptualisation of the white female body, but also of institutions such as the Royal Family and class systems, which are indicative of national identity."

Pippa's "disruption" is, like Markle's, racialized, assuming the form of a desirably large rear end, historically a trait associated not with white femininity but with interracial taboo

—as evidenced by the hypersexualization of Baartman—until its reclamation in the music of hip hop artist Sir Mix-a-lot ("Baby Got Back" 1992), the pop group Destiny's Child ("Bootylicious" 2001), and Jennifer Lopez ("Booty" 2014), as well as by celebrity influencers such as Kim Kardashian.

Thus, before Markle had even arrived on the scene, Pippa's booty had established the hypersexualized, interracial terms of comparison that mainstream and social media would use, readily inserting Markle into that space as the next scandalous affront to white princesshood, and to white Britishness more generally.

Markle would disrupt the white British body politic further because of her racial identity and American heritage, which underpinned the representation of her sexuality as salacious as compared to Middleton's. In 2016, *The Sun* noted that Markle's "wears [her hair] in gentle tonged waves—similar to [. . .] the Duchess of Cambridge" and touts as "raunchy" photographs of Markle that appeared in *Men's Health Magazine* which depict her fully clothed with her bra visible through a semi-sheer black shirt (Hayley Richardson 2016). According to the same tabloids, the fully transparent dress modelled by Middleton on the catwalk at a 2009 charity event that supposedly clinched her romance with William— through which a black bra and panties were completely visible—had been merely "skin baring," "risque" and "daring" (CR staff 2020). These distinctions established the pecking order in terms of class and race: Kate was daring, Meghan tawdry. This binary rubric illustrates Shome's assertion that "women of colour are doubly displaced from the national imaginary"; "possessing a relation with the nation that is one of negation, disidentification, and erasure, their bodies offer no hope for recuperation into the national family as does the white female body" (Raka Shome 2001).

The minutiae of the nuptials themselves offered more fodder for press speculation about sororal competition. Whereas Middleton was commended by the *Daily Express* for following the "royal code" and selecting a "traditional" bouquet of lily of the valley, Markle was condemned for using the same flower in Princess Charlotte's headpiece because they are toxic if ingested (Figure 3, Amelie Henden 2019). Reports emerged that Markle had made

Kate Middleton's homegrown bouquet of lily of the valley follows royal code

Royal wedding: How Meghan Markle's flowers may have put Princess Charlotte's life at risk

Figure 3. Comparison of wedding flowers.

Middleton cry at a fitting for Charlotte's dress (Jack Royston 2018; Josh Duboff 2018), although Markle asserted that the reverse was the case in the Oprah Winfrey interview (2021).

The depiction of a wedding awash in family feuds extended beyond sisterly squabbling. In the run up to the nuptials, the press seized on Markle's relationship with her father as an object of interest. The *Mail on Sunday* accused Thomas Markle of staging paparazzi photos of himself less than a week before the wedding (Michael Powell, Ben Ellery and Caroline Graham 2018). The elder Markle reportedly suffered a heart attack—an incident his daughter learned about only through the American tabloid *TMZ* (Shannon Barbour 2020)—and was unable to attend the wedding. News outlets from *BBC, The Guardian and the Telegraph* in the UK to *Marie Claire*, ABC, *People* and *Town and Country* in the US applauded the triumph of British good manners over American vulgarity in their praise for the gallantry of Markle's future father-in-law Prince Charles, who stepped in to walk her down the aisle (Caroline Davies 2018; Jade Onyanga-Omara 2018).

Finally, the wedding ceremony itself, an event watched by an estimated 1.9 billion people, was presented as "different from royal weddings of the past" (Nicola Slawson and Sarah Marsh 2018) because of its "bicultural blackness" (Salamishah Tillet 2018). Both the bridal couple and the press were interested in exploring the significance of Markle's African American heritage, albeit in very different ways. The wedding "celebrated Markle's heritage and placed it unapologetically at the heart of Britain's most elite institution," rendering Harry and Meghan "a metaphor for the state of multicultural Britain" (Afua Hirsch 2018).

A piece in the British *Metro* spoke to the stakes associated with the event amongst Britain's communities of colour.

> She is a mixed-race American that has just become a duchess in the realm. I grew up here, who am I now to question if I'm British enough? (Funme Olutoye 2018)

The ceremony offered numerous opportunities to highlight Markle's Blackness, choices that the tabloid press described as fomenting family disunity. They speculated in particular about the discomfort caused by the African American cleric and the gospel choir. According to *Express*, multiculturalism was an embarrassing American import that caused the royal family distress. The Reverend Michael Curry, the 27th Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal church was renamed "the rocking Rev from Chicago" and the "eccentric" preacher's 14 minute sermon was blamed for causing consternation amongst the royal entourage, including the groom himself, who "appeared exasperated with the holy man, whose gospel take on the ceremony was compared to scenes from Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*" (Carly Read 2018).

The reference to a Hollywood musical comedy whose central conceit is a racial fish out of water joke—namely, the incongruity of Whoopi Goldberg playing a Catholic nun—was far from accidental. Throughout Markle and Windsor's courtship and marriage, press and social media presented Markle as ill-suited to membership in the British Royal Family, bested at every turn by her exemplary sister-in-law. That comparative narrative would become more pronounced as Markle traversed the next royal family rite of passage.

Duchesses at War: Un/Ruly Pregnancies and Illegitimate Mothering

Media coverage of Markle's pregnancy—from its announcement in October 2018 to the birth of Archie Mountbatten-Windsor in April 2019—relied, somewhat ironically, upon a feuding family discourse suggesting Markle's disruptive illegitimacy at the precise moment that she was engaged in the profoundly legitimising act of producing an heir. This campaign, not surprisingly, compared Markle and Middleton in terms of their approaches to motherhood.

Soon after Archie's birth, *The Telegraph* foregrounded Markle's "Americanness" against Middleton's quintessential "Britishness," asking: "Meghan versus Kate—how will their American and British parenting styles differ?" (Celia Walden 2019). This manufactured competition attempts to distinguish between the duchesses on nationality—British versus American—but also compares their suitability as parents within the British Royal Family. The *Telegraph* headline is symptomatic of a rhetorical format that the international media cultivated during this period which cast any royal incident as clickbait drama. The *New Zealand Herald* led with "Kate versus Meghan: Spot the major difference in their photos," a feature comparing the way in which the two duchesses pose for photographs (Martha Cliff 2018). Whereas Middleton is "shy and awkward," Meghan is accused of "camera courting" as she addresses the camera directly. This camera courtship, which revives the Jezebel stereotype, must be explained away generationally—Markle "grew up with the selfie generation"—despite the fact the duchesses were born five months apart. In keeping with the press treatment of Markle's Americanness as problematic, the day after she gave birth, the *Telegraph* asked whether the child would be liable for US taxes, as his mother had retained her US citizenship (Harriet Alexander 2019).

Media narratives of Markle's pregnancy and Archie's birth treated Middleton as an exemplary mother and family member. Her success became the standard against which Markle could not compare. Middleton became the "idealized maternal citizen" parenting the "idealized future citizen" (Jorie Lagerwey 2017). By contrast, Markle is pathologized in commentary that calls up her biracial American identity, her celebrity and her feminist politics. That the terms of royal motherhood are so fraught is not surprising: the monarchy is built upon the agreement that women's bodies should function as biological machines to reproduce heirs and hereditary power (Clancy et al. 2018).

The press subjected Markle's pregnancy to disciplinary scrutiny and narratives of pathology and illegitimacy; the polar opposite to Middleton's. According to Nicole Pietsch 2002:

> an illegitimate pregnancy is a pregnancy conceived "contrary to law, rules or logic"; by implication, the illegitimately pregnant woman is a law-breaker, a recreant, one who actively undermines and topples "the rules." Ideologically, she is non-conformist and lawless: functionally, she is morally, socially and sexually aberrant.

Moreover, "illegitimacy is laden with inferred meaning: incorrect, untitled, and unentitled" (Nicole Pietsch 2002, 89). Tabloid coverage of the ways in which Middleton and Markle treated their pregnancy bumps adheres to this script. One *Daily Mail* headline during Middleton's pregnancy with Prince Louis reads: "Pregnant Kate tenderly cradles her baby bump while wrapping up her royal duties ahead of maternity leave" (Siofra Brennan and Rebecca English 2018). Markle's treatment by the same newspaper suggests lawlessness,

selfishness and aberrant behaviour: "Why can't Meghan Markle keep her hands off her bump? Experts tackle the question that has got the nation talking: Is it pride, vanity, acting —or a new age bonding technique" (Mail On Sunday 2019). *The Sun* goes a step further by referring to Markle's gesture as a "baby bump Barbie" act, indicting her maternity as mere performance (Becky Pemberton 2019). Some tabloid magazines viewed Markle's pregnancy as "overshadowing" Middleton's, implying Markle was disrupting the appropriate hierarchy between the two women (Cheryl Wischhover 2018). Markle was also seen as toppling royal protocol through her feminist politics. According to the tabloids, "Meghan WON'T pose for an "on the steps" moment after leaving hospital with Baby Sussex because it doesn't fit with her "feminist world view'" (Claire Toureille 2019).

Markle's maternity was deemed so socially aberrant that tabloids amplified social media speculation about whether she was actually pregnant or had used a surrogate and was misrepresenting that fact. A similar campaign had been waged against Beyoncé Knowles during her first pregnancy (Sheila Marikar 2011). The *Daily Beast* termed these theories the "bizarre cult of Meghan Markle pregnancy Truthers" (Jasmin Malik Chua 2019). These "Truthers" were not anti-surrogacy *per se*; rather, they questioned Markle's honesty and her desire and/or ability to produce heirs.

This surrogacy speculation engendered the Twitter and Instagram hashtag #duchessofdeception, which reached 1.5 million people in early 2019 (Jasmin Malik Chua 2019). As they had done with Knowles, commentators questioned whether or not Markle's bump was real. One headline claimed the bump made a "popping" sound during a royal engagement (Catherine Armecin 2019). In an article questioning whether Markle was wearing a "moonbump"—a fake pregnancy belly—the *International Business Times* contrasted Markle's unnatural motherhood with interviews with "real mothers" who commented that "that kind of squatting is not possible after the fourth month, no matter how much yoga you do" and "as a mother of three children all grown up now, there is no way I could have bent down on my ninth month and got back up again that quickly" (Catherine Armecin 2019). To prove Markle's deception, social media surveillance memes compared her often-photographed body wearing the same clothing on the same day—contending that one image displayed a bump and the other did not (Figure 4). This media-driven narrative named Markle's pregnancy pathological and even fictional, reanimating racist tropes of Black maternal illegitimacy associated with the history of enslavement but persisting well into the 21st century. This racist rhetoric deems Black women unsuitable mothers and Black children at the mercy of "the depravity of their mother" (Marquita Marie Gammage 2015).

During the Oprah Winfrey interview, Markle disclosed troubling comments voiced by royal family members speculating about the colour of her baby's skin. After his birth, Markle and her son were subjected to overt racism by the British media. Much of the reportage focused on BBC radio presenter Danny Baker's Twitter post of a baby chimpanzee with the caption, "Royal baby leaves hospital." Although Baker was fired by the BBC, his tweet remained, a blatantly racist image suggesting the animality and otherness of people of colour. This incident brings into sharp relief the unmarked whiteness of the royal family, with Archie's birth receiving significantly different treatment from his "white cousins of authority" (Jorie Lagerwey 2017).

Throughout Markle's pregnancy, family discourse functioned as a disciplinary force, punishing Markle for her departures from the Royal Family's white, patriarchal Britishness.

Figure 4. Surveillance of the Sussex Baby Bump.

The rivalry with Middleton rendered Markle the unruly, lesser duchess and illegitimate mother. Recirculating tropes of Black motherhood as pathological, press and social media coverage valorised Middleton in comparison to the "deceptive" Markle, establishing a familial tension that creates an idealized mother of the nation's next ruling generation (Middleton), while castigating the mixed-race mother who disrupts the hierarchies and protocols of the royal family (Markle). The Royal Family may be read comically within the famous feuding family frame, but it is also an emblem of English aristocratic white privilege. Markle and Windsor's marriage and Archie's birth disrupts those privileges, with the soap opera storyline of feuding sisters-in-law displacing these social and political challenges entirely onto the domestic sphere.

"Megxit": an ungrateful cinderella

When Markle and Windsor married, Queen Elizabeth bestowed the titles of Duke and Duchess of Sussex upon them, which they abbreviated as the Sussexes. Less than two years later, the Sussexes publicly announced their decision to step back from royal duties, engineering an unprecedented uncoupling from The Firm. The decision was engendered in large part by the press's treatment of Markle, as documented throughout this article, and the lack of support from the Royal Family, as stated in the Oprah Winfrey interview. The 2019 ITV documentary *Harry and Meghan: An African Journey* was the first instance in which the Sussexes publicly acknowledged their struggles with what they termed the British press's "bullying" of Meghan. In it, an emotionally distressed Harry declares "I am not going to enter a game that killed my Mum," a reference to fears that his wife would meet the same fate as Diana. Markle speaks to the ways she coped with the pressures of assimilating into the royal family, noting: "I really tried to adopt this British sensibility of a stiff upper lip, but I think what that does internally is really damaging . . . I never thought this would be easy, but I thought it would be fair." Markle here, and more directly in the Oprah Winfrey interview, articulates the feelings of tremendous isolation that led to suicidal thoughts (Mark Landler 2021).

Immediately following the announcement that the Sussexes would step down, press and social media reverted to form, trumpeting narratives of family infighting. The Cinderella narrative advanced at the time of the wedding morphed into the story of an ungrateful duchess motivated by an unseemly pursuit of wealth and fame: "Meghan Markle just flipped the Cinderella fantasy on its big crowned head" (Monica Hesse 2020). The couple's statement, disseminated via Instagram, was not approved by the Queen, leading the press to castigate Markle for slighting the Queen and breaching protocol. The headlines noted Markle's "lack of respect" for the monarchy and the Queen (Elisa Menendez 2020) and highlighted her disruption across the Royal Family: "Megxit—Philip's frustration: 'What the hell are they playing at'" (New Zealand Herald 2020); "Kate Middleton looks strained ahead of Meghan and Harry's crisis talks at Sandringham" (Russell Myers and Abigail O'Leary 2020); "Inside the Canadian fortress where Markle plotted Megxit" (Sara Nathan 2020). In these headlines, the feuding family discourse is used to paint Markle as a schemer flouting the status quo and the regulatory protocols of the Royal Family; not merely an outsider, but an "opportunistic, spoiled brat holding the monarchy to ransom" (Nika Shakhnazarova 2020). The ungrateful Cinderella trope, which her father repeated in comments made *Thomas Markle: My Story* (2020), became central to the discursive formation of Megxit as a news story.

An emphasis on the personal terms for negotiating the legal separation became a structuring device in the reportage: the infinitely hashtaggable "Megxit" (Meghan-Exit) suggests a domesticated, diminished version of Brexit (Britain-Exit) and conveys the notion that Meghan was the driving force behind the royal couple's escape plan and the one leaving. The Queen called a summit which the press dubbed the "Sandringham Showdown" and "Megxit Crisis Talks" (Victoria Ward 2020; Mark Hodge 2020) and couched in the lexicon of Brexit-era clickbait: "Hard or soft Megxit? What's on the table?" (Valentine Low and Rhys Blakely 2020).

The negotiations between the Sussexes and The Firm represented far more than family infighting: the break certainly involved the Sussexes gaining control over their lifestyle, their image, and their humanitarian work. It also represented a renegotiation of lucrative branding rights, the vast cultural capital, and the soft power associated with the Royal Family brand. Markle was configured as disruptive, the source of conflict, with tabloids reporting that Markle "threatened" the Queen with a "tell-all Oprah interview" during the talks (Emily Andrews 2020).

The feuding family narrative papered over a battle for family branding, with Harry and Meghan intending to carve out a "progressive new role" as royals and seeking financial independence (BBC "Harry and Meghan"). They ultimately lost the battle to keep their Sussex brand, under whose banner they had already acquired 11 million Instagram followers. That the break was a matter for the business news, not just the lifestyle pages, was confirmed by coverage in outlets such as *Market Watch*, which nevertheless resorted to Cinderella imagery: "She found out she would be a civil servant in a tiara. Even without HRH titles, Meghan and Harry's #Megxit will make them rich beyond their wildest dreams" (Quentin Quentin Fottrell 2020). The same article reported that, according to an insider, "they broke off from the royals [. . .] because they want to build their own brand" (Quentin Fottrell 2020).

Speculation about business interests anchored much of the coverage, given that Markle signed a voiceover deal with Disney a few days after the Megxit announcement, followed by a Netflix deal (with Windsor) several months later. Even as the Sussexes were harangued for abandoning their royal obligations, media companies primed Megxit as drama for new content: in 2020, *Lifetime* announced a forthcoming film *Harry & Meghan: Escaping the Palac*e (Erica Tempesta 2020).

The ungrateful Cinderella narrative came face to face with the tabloid press in 2019, when Markle launched a lawsuit—which ultimately proved unsuccessful—against the *Mail on Sunday* for publishing a letter she wrote to her father in 2018, an act she referred to as "public shaming" (Jack Royston 2018). Harry vociferously supported the lawsuit, tracing his aversion to tabloid tactics to the 1997 death of his mother Diana in a car accident for which aggressive paparazzi were held responsible. His statement drew an unmistakable parallel between his mother and his wife:

> my deepest fear is history repeating itself. I've seen what happens when someone I love is commoditised to the point that they are no longer treated or seen as a real person. I lost my mother and now I watch my wife falling victim to the same powerful forces (Erin Hill, 2019).

Media coverage of Megxit, the ongoing lawsuits against tabloids and paparazzi, and the Oprah Winfrey interview, which aired on CBS on March 7 2021, has consistently focused on personal tensions between Markle and members of the British Royal Family, emphasizing her relationship to the royals and, by extension, to Britain, as one of disidentification and disruption, crystallizing the sense that there is "no hope of recuperation into the national family" for Markle (Raka Shome 2001).

The Oprah Winfrey interview, which aired after this article was submitted for review, in many ways lends support to our central argument. In fact, the media coverage of the "family feuds" analysed in this essay was explicitly mentioned, suggesting their central importance to Markle's representation as a "disruptive duchess."

The most inflammatory information emerging from the interview surrounded the revelation that unnamed members of the royal family expressed concern that Archie would not have white-enough skin. Historically the British nation has been represented by "the image of a British, white family," whose whiteness has remained unspoken to avoid the appearance of "a racist royal family" or practices of "racial purity" (Michael Billig 2004). The feuding family discourse centering Markle as disruptor that this article analyses, culminating with Megxit and the Oprah Winfrey interview, simultaneously voices and suppresses the unspoken whiteness of the Royal Family. By focusing on the domestic drama of dueling duchesses, press and social media narratives maintain the unnamed but potent discourse of racial purity within the British national imaginary.

Conclusion

This article contends that the discourse of the feuding family was central to promulgating the notion of Meghan Markle as a "disruptive duchess" in the mainstream and tabloid press and social media. This device both acknowledges and attempts to contain the existential threat that Markle poses to the white patriarchal traditions of the British Royal Family. The domestication of these conflicts, which are translated into catfights and family drama, enables the surfacing as well as the suppression of the challenges that Markle's

intersectional identities pose, denying their relevance to structural social issues in Britain and elsewhere and relegating them to the realm of celebrity gossip.

Markle's self-professed feminism challenges the patriarchal foundation of the royal family, whereas her biracial American identity threatens white privilege associated with lineage. Markle's status as a celebrity threatens to expose the fact that the royal family itself, with no actual governing to do, has become a stage act, albeit one that is a lucrative draw for international visitors, who contributed an estimated £550 to the British economy in 2017 in Royal Family-related tourism (Kate Whitfield 2019).

Royal Family feuds may indeed reflect family tensions, ginned up by the tabloid press and social media and served up reality television style. But they also represent a struggle over lucrative branding opportunities designed to preserve a dynasty representing the lingering triumph of whiteness, patriarchy, and colonialism and whose wealth and celebrity have secured its political as well as economic power on a global scale.

Markle's case study, which is focused on mainstream, tabloid and social media discourses, suggests that further research should look towards the way inciteful racist discourses are generated and circulated within contemporary news production cultures more broadly, particularly in light of the racist news narratives that emerged around the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

The ongoing contestation of Markle's public image warrants further examination as well. In November 2020, she authored a *The New York Times* article revealing she had suffered a miscarriage, sharing her story with the aim of breaking a taboo. On Valentine's Day 2021, her announcement of a Sussex pregnancy coincided with Diana Spencer's announcement of her pregnancy with Harry 37 years earlier—prompting a critical headline from *The Daily Star*, "Publicity-Shy Woman tells 7.67 bn People: I'm Pregnant" (2021). Markle's deliberate use of her celebrity to transform the conversation around motherhood, coupled with her cultivation of an identity related to but also beyond the reach of rigid Royal Family protocols, similarly deserves attention in future research, as the Sussexes will inevitably continue to forge their media brand.

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