Disciplining the M/Other: examining contemporary mediated motherhood through the case of Meghan Markle

The pregnant body in the cultural imagination has long been constructed in relation to taboos and cultural anxieties that deem it something to be kept private (Stensvold, 2015; Douglas, 1966; Hanson, 2004). Since the 1990s the pregnant body has been hyper-visible in popular culture. From the naked photographs of Demi Moore for *Vanity Fair* in 1991 (Tyler, 2011) to contemporary discourses of the 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013), the surveillant gaze to which women are subjected intensifies around the pregnant body. **The tenor of this discourse varies depending upon the identity of the** pregnant person in question, with the pregnant body that is celebrated typically being white, middle-/upper-class, heteronormative, cis-gendered, and able-bodied, and 'Other' bodies being publicly castigated (Said, 1978; Ahmed, 2010). As Clare Hanson argues, pregnancy is "he mechanism by which society reproduces itself [and as such] is no means a private matter, but is peculiarly susceptible to social intervention and control" (2004, p.6). In contemporary media cultures, pregnancy, and the bodies of pregnant people, are public property for scrutiny and judgement.

Discourses around pregnancy are shaped by the way we treat women in the public eye as objects to be scrutinised (Holmes and Negra, 2011). As a public figure, Meghan Markle is already a site of intense "proliferation of discourse" (Yelin and Clancy, 2020: 3), sparking discussions about her celebrity, race, gender, feminist agenda, royal credibility, and progressive political values. As a divorced, American, Catholic-raised woman of colour, she disrupts the white-supremacist, nationalist, patriarchal norms that the British royal family relies upon (Clancy and Yelin, 2021). Since her wedding to Prince Harry in May 2018, she has been the sustained focus of coverage in media around the world, particularly in the UK tabloid media. Many of these pieces were increasingly critical, with racist and sexist abuse of Markle abounding across popular culture. Her pregnancy with Archie Harrison Mountbatten-

Windsor, announced in October 2018 before she gave birth in May 2019, only exacerbated these discourses.

Markle exists at an intersection of maternity, race, celebrity, and royalty, which are all vectors of public judgement, opprobrium and/or ownership. As this special issue will show, each of these vectors also maintain, reproduce, complicate, and contradict one another. As a woman of colour at the heart of institutional colonial, white supremacist power, Markle's pregnancy upturns the presumed whiteness of the British monarchy for the national imagination - and this whiteness is a foundation of its power, colonialism, and white supremacy. If white supremacy is invested in systems of white futurity, then it is threatened by the reproduction of mixed-race children (Cashin, 2017). Media stories which repeatedly emphasised Meghan's descent from enslaved African Americans, for example, reflect anxieties about Harry and Meghan's marriage through the "impurity of bloodlines" (Woldemikael & Woldemikael, 2021: 5), particularly important in an institution founded on inheritance.

The monarchy is built on histories of exploiting women's bodies for the reproduction of an heir, and with it the securing of monarchical power (Clancy and Yelin, 2021). Producing an heir (and historically a male heir) is the benchmark of success for a royal wife and has historically been a matter of life and death, as seen in Henry VIII's abuse and murder of his wives who 'failed' to provide him with such. Speculation around her future child's likely skin tone (Roberts, 2019) and the fervour surrounding the official photograph of baby Archie with his mixed heritage represented as Queen Elizabeth and Doria Ragland look over him (Hill and Perry, 2019), reveal both Britain's continuing racist discomfort with interracial relationships and the ways in which this relationship in particular has the potential to destabilise entrenched ideas of "bloodline" as a foundation for racial and royal hierarchies (Yelin and Paule, 2021).

Markle's pregnancy was beset by a series of negative and increasingly far-fetched stories, including for example, suggestions that she touched and cradled her baby bump too often in public (Mail on Sunday, 2019). Multiple public and media commentaries accused

Markle of wearing a ‘fake baby bump’ to lie about her pregnancy, and this prompted forensic examination of the shape and size of her bump as she moved to ‘demonstrate’ its falsity (Frizzell, 2019). The hashtag #moonbump began trending, which is the branding name of silicone and foam fake pregnant bellies used to recreate maternity in television and film productions. Other accusations of falsehood included suggestions that her and Harry had lied about Archie’s birth date (The List, 2019). In questioning the veracity of Markle’s pregnancy, such rumours seek to challenge the legitimacy of, and reveal white discomfort with, her and Archie’s place in the British royal family. Throwing doubt on the legitimacy of royal pregnancies has historically been a tactic for querying the legitimacy of heirs who are seen to complicate the royal bloodline. In the sixteenth century, James II’s Catholic heir was widely rumoured to be an imposter, smuggled into the birthing room in a warming pan (Clark, 2004). Such discourses encouraged revolt against a potential Catholic monarch.

Challenges to Markle’s maternal legitimacy take on particular purchase because this was a royal pregnancy. But practices of birthing are also structurally racist, as illustrated by the racist origins of the field of gynaecology using Black, pregnant, enslaved women as test subjects; the racist history of breastfeeding where Black ‘mammies’ feed white babies to ‘protect’ white women; and the higher mortality rates for Black mothers that persist today because doctors typically do not take their health concerns seriously, a failure to listen to Black women that permeates wider society. Idealised ideas of motherhood are implicitly classed and racialised around white, middle-class femininity, meaning that Black women are both policed according to ideas of white motherhood and thus found lacking, *and* decentralised from their own mothering stories. Discourses of questioned legitimacy are also common in Black women’s experience of motherhood, particularly when they mother mixed-race children. Indeed, assumptions that women of colour are their children’s nanny is a common racist trope.

In a viral video, white American expert in South Korea, Robert Kelly, was interrupted by his two children while filming a live interview on the BBC, and a South Korean woman is seen dragging the children from the room. While many viewers assumed she was the nanny,

the woman in the video was Kelly's wife and the children's mother, Ms. Jung-a Kim (Chok, 2017). Likewise, in an article for *Elle,* Meghan Markle wrote that her mother was assumed to be her nanny when she was growing up (Markle, 2016). Assumptions that women of colour exist in service to white employers is a legacy of slavery that still shapes today's racialised labour economy. In Meghan's case in particular, as Shani Orgad and Kate Baldwin's article in this issue expounds, this tendency "positions her simultaneously as subservient racialized other (the mammy) and (im)proper white mother, echoing the experience of many Black mothers being mistaken for the nanny" (this issue).

In January 2020, Harry and Meghan announced they were "stepping back" from official royal duties and starting a new life in the USA and Canada (BBC, 2020). In November 2020, Meghan Markle published an article in the *New York Times* describing her experience of a miscarriage earlier in the year. The piece, entitled 'The losses we share', spoke of the "unbearable grief" of losing a baby which is "experienced by many but talked about by few," drawing attention to the taboo of losing a child through miscarriage (Markle, 2020). The article was praised by celebrities (Jewell, 2020) and charities such as the UK's Miscarriage Association (Perry, 2020). Their national director, Ruth Bender Atik, said Meghan was "trying to reduce the taboo" of miscarriage because "people often feel very unsupported and alone" (ibid.). Despite one in four pregnancies ending in miscarriage (Tommy's, 2018), it remains a taboo subject in popular discourse.

As Markle writes in her *New York Times* article, "despite the staggering commonality of this pain, the conversation remains taboo, riddled with (unwarranted) shame, and perpetuating a cycle of solitary mourning." Societal and cultural judgement blames women for causing the miscarriage by behaving inappropriately, when in reality miscarriage is overwhelmingly caused by chromosomal factors which are unaffected by lifestyle or environment (Tommy's, 2019): an extension of the pervasive moralising and policing around women's bodily autonomy. Such taboo around miscarriage means people are often unable to access the support they need. Mental health support provision is limited, and informal

support from friends and families is stymied by cultural discomfort. These systematic inequalities are impacted by class, race, sexuality, and disability.

Miscarriage is not a homogenous experience (for a start, not everyone who becomes pregnant wants to become a parent, something that is rarely considered in discourses surrounding miscarriage). In the USA, access to medical care is expensive and hinges upon one's employment status (further implicating immigrant women or those with unstable employment status). In the UK, while services may be available to all in theory, chronic underfunding of the NHS means that timely counselling around miscarriage and maternal traumas remains inaccessible to most.

Markle's discourse of shared losses are in part an act of breaking isolating taboos. They are also an exercise in relatability common throughout all royal public image management. Her weaving of collective grief in a year of racist police brutality and the Covid-19 pandemic, with her own baby loss, deftly elides the distance between her own experience and that of her readers, due to her extreme wealth and royal insulation. The title of Markle's *New York Times* piece 'the losses we share', then, raises questions over who is *sharing* in these losses at a time of widening global inequality.

Social media has become a space for sharing experiences and breaking silences around taboo topics, as seen in the global outpouring about experiences of rape and sexual assault attached to the #MeToo hashtag. As a participatory and (supposedly) egalitarian space, social media facilitates opportunities to share experiences in small communities of like-minded individuals. Access to this space is, of course, limited along intersectional classed, gendered, and racialised lines, and minority groups are often disproportionately subject to abuse and trolling (Yelin and Clancy, 2020). Making personal grief public in these spaces therefore carries risks: the harshest of which await women of colour due to online misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy, 2018).

Journalist Brendan O'Neill, for example, published an article in *Spiked* (2020) entitled 'Do we really need to know about Meghan Markle's miscarriage?' which describes Markle's confessional writing as "displays of one's every trial and malady...laid out in grim detail"

which he views as a form of “emotional sluttiness.” Such gendered, sexualised language reveals the respectability politics (Harris, 2003) that women and especially women of colour must navigate. Concerned that Markle sharing her experience will ‘denude it of its sanctity’, O’Neill sexualises her account, revealing his inability to view women’s bodies beyond a sexual lens, while at the same time clutching his pearls moralising about the sexual framing that he himself imposed. As Yelin has argued, when celebrity women share autobiographical experiences around their bodies and emotions, “acceptable femininity is policed in terms of restraint, and sexual morality is always at stake in female exposure” (2020, p.146). The discomfort about Markle sharing her story reveals common moralising, misogynistic ideologies of the ‘rational’ male versus the ‘irrational’ female. These underpin wider socio-political fears of the about ‘unruly’ female bodies that leak (menstruating, breastfeeding, birthing), and as such are deemed to need control, quantification, and management (Shildrick, 1997; Rowe, 2011; MacDonald, 2007). O’Neill called Markle’s piece ‘emotionally incontinent’, drawing on a politics of disgust (Nussbaum, 2004) rendering her experiences abject and representing her as ‘out of control’. These notions of the ‘unruly’ female body are heavily racialised, with women of colour particularly subject to having bodies seen as disobedient and out of place (Shaw, 2006; Springs, 2019).

Just prior to Markle’s article, in September 2020 Asian-American model and television star Chrissy Teigen posted photographs of herself and her husband John Legend in hospital, having lost their son at 20 weeks pregnant. Alongside an outpouring of public sympathy, many internet commentators began asking personal questions which blamed Teigen for her pregnancy loss, and, like with Markle, queried the legitimacy of her decision to share her grief online (Oderberg, 2020). In his piece on Markle, O’Neill (2020) also commented on Teigen, calling her photographs “frankly unsettling”, suggesting their explicit depiction of a woman’s body in turmoil disturbed his (patriarchal) status quo - that Teigen was another woman who defied moralised boundaries of control. In October 2020, in an article for *Medium*, Teigen described her experience, telling her detractors “I cannot express

how little I care that you hate the photos" (Teigen, 2020) because she did what felt right in the time of her grief.

Teigen and Markle are both women of colour in the public eye. Both have been subject to various attacks couched in "misogynoir" (Bailey and Trudy, 2018), with both even attracting the vitriol of ex-President of the USA Donald Trump, whose presidency was marked by explicit racism and sexism (Teigen was eventually blocked on Twitter by Trump). It is notable, then, that in late 2020 (after a year defined by the increased visibility and activism of the Black Lives Matter movement), it is these particular women who are publicly rejecting the shame surrounding miscarriage. They not only reject patriarchal norms that moralise that women must restrain their 'leaky' bodies (and emotions), but also, in their disruption of "white temporalities that are policed, framed, morphed by white heteropatriarchy," both women are "queering miscarriage by taking it away from the ideologies of whiteness" (Kafantaris, 2020). Both women refuse white supremacist heteropatriarchal ideas of procreation as imperative, particularly notable at a time of growing authoritarian neoliberal right-wing movements around the world, which increasingly espouse patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies.

Bereaved Black mothers have been prominent in the Black Lives Matter movement **(Pearl, 2020),** and those whose children have been murdered by police officers or gun violence in the USA have founded The Mothers of the Movement, making various high-profile media and political appearances. That the biggest collective activist movement of the contemporary era has been spearheaded by Black women's grief demonstrates how Black women's reproduction occurs under the spectre of threat to Black life in societies built on racism. Mary Douglas argues that cultural discomfort with pregnancy hinges upon its liminality: the unborn child's "present position is ambiguous, its future equally. For no one can say… whether it will survive the hazards of infancy. It is often treated as both vulnerable and dangerous" (1966, p.95). **As well as cultural discomfort with Markle's racialised ambiguity as a biracial woman (Woldemikeal and Woldemikeal, 2021; Washington, 2020),** the reception of Markle's racialised maternal identity reveals the intolerability of these

ambiguities in a society invested in policing such boundaries and the hierarchies at stake in them. For all these reasons, Markle offers an example through which to examine the contemporary mediation of motherhood and the disciplinary impulses that construct the M/Other.

This special issue

This special issue considers contemporary conceptions of pregnancy and motherhood, and the intersections of gender, race, age, class, and national identity within them, as constructed through the case study of Meghan Markle. Markle's public performance of femininity through pregnancy and motherhood is a particularly valuable case study for communication studies scholars due to the discussions she has provoked around gender and race, her position as an American actor who has married into (and then departed from) the British royal family, and the questions these discussions raise around national identity, (cultural) capital, class, celebrity, (post)colonialism, politics, and power. This special issue examines the various messages that circulated in global media around Meghan Markle's pregnancy and the birth of her son, Archie Harrison, and their interpretation in light of the current socio-political climate. Each article takes a different perspective to the cultural and representational politics that surround these public media events and the neoliberal, commodified, sexist, racist, ageist rhetorics that circulate within them.

In November 2019, the authors in this special issue took part in a symposium in London, titled 'The Cultural Politics of Meghan Markle'. Authors presented their work either via video link or in-person, to facilitate contributions from geographically dispersed scholars at different stages in their career. At the time, neither we nor the authors knew the extent to which Harry and Meghan's journey as royals was about to change. Less than two months later, they announced their resignation from the British monarchy. Our authors deal with this shift to various extents. While it is worth noting that the majority of the papers were (first) written prior to the resignation, they still speak to a particular conjuncture in Harry and Meghan's story, and in particular how Markle's royal pregnancy both reflects and complicates intersectional issues of representation.

The authors in this special issue have used a variety of names to refer to Markle, from ‘Markle’, to ‘Meghan’, to the ‘Duchess of Sussex’. These names have been chosen by the authors themselves to fit their particular argument, and this variety reflects how Markle’s public persona is taken up, maintained, and rejected, in various ways. We think of Meghan as a public figure, or what Richard Dyer calls a “star image” (1979), and are interested in not necessarily Markle’s ‘authentic self’ (and, indeed, we have no access to this self) but rather a constellation of signs and signifiers that reflect wider socio-political trends.

This issue features four articles from international, interdisciplinary scholars, from the fields of media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, gender and women’s studies, English literature, film studies, feminist media and cultural studies, visual studies, queer theory, and American studies. The papers each take a different perspective on Meghan Markle’s representation in global media culture during her pregnancy with Archie, and during her mothering, in particular how these constructions are caught up in the (cultural) politics of race, gender, class, national identity, celebrity, and power.

Shani Orgad and Kate Baldwin explore key mediated moments of Meghan Markle’s maternity to consider how she might become a space through which we can rewrite dominant narratives of Black motherhood. The authors consider Markle in terms of maternal labour, and the ways in which it is rendered invisible, unjustly distributed, and frequently challenged. Orgad and Baldwin demonstrate that, while these may be issues affecting all maternal labour, the worst treatment is reserved for Black mothers in all three cases. Using Markle as a figure who demonstrates intersectional identities of gender, race, and class, Orgad and Baldwin show how representations of Markle might ‘obscure, normalize, and reinforce’ norms of mothering at this particular conjuncture.

Fiona Handyside focuses on representations of Markle’s mother, Doria Ragland. Discussing Ragland in terms of the politics of respectability, Handyside argues that positive representations of her as, for example, having “poise” and “grace”, illustrate how Ragland is mediated according to the scripts of white femininity, and it is her distance from Black, single motherhood that is celebrated. Indeed, Handyside notes that repeated assessments of

Ragland's behaviour, and the fact that she does indeed 'behave appropriately' at royal events, are also "unwittingly expressing surprise that Ragland is there at all", which works to reproduce and maintain systems of white privilege and power.

Mary McGill explores representations of Markle's motherhood in one particular UK tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Mail*. Specifically, she analyses points of 'contrast', whereby Markle is consistently compared to other royal figures, and particularly the other key royal mother, Kate Middleton, with whom Markle is claimed to have a tense relationship. McGill notes that the newspaper produces Markle as a racialised 'other', where her motherhood, royal behaviour, and fashion choices are described in ways which seem to oppose royal 'norms'. In so doing, and given the politics of *Daily Mail* as a right-wing, conservative media text, these discourses produce Markle as a "threat to the traditions of the British monarchy", drawing upon binaries of "whiteness and blackness, of good women and bad women, of what Britishness is and what Britishness isn't".

Jonathan Ward turns our attention to representations of Markle on social media. Analysing the @sussexroyal Instagram account, Ward considers representations of Markle through the lens of royal public image management and, as such, how "the racialized Markle might be a useful nationalistic and/or imperial spectacle for the British monarchy". Considering images of Harry and Meghan interacting with British children on the side-lines at royal appearances, at a visit to a children's hospital and a British children's charity, for example, and of her own maternity with Archie, he suggests that these representations exemplify "the function of imperial behaviour – to ensure the successful futurity of British whiteness – while sanitizing the history of brutal actions undertaken in the name of Empire." Accordingly, Markle's position as a woman of colour is either drawn forward or retracted, depending on what image the monarchy is trying to construct at that time.

We are delighted to have Catherine Squires contribute the postscript for this special issue to respond to, and draw together, the key themes. Squires' research on gendered media and representations of the post-racial (2014) speaks precisely to the ways in which Markle was, upon her marriage at least, constructed as a figure who has transcended racial

inequalities, thus demonstrating the possibilities for others. Squires has demonstrated the limits to this narrative and throughout this special issue, many examples will show these limits in representations of her subsequent time in the royal family and most particularly her pregnancy and mothering of Archie.

As this special issue goes to press, Harry and Meghan have just given a televised interview to Oprah Winfrey about their experiences in the royal family (2021). Their accusations of institutional racism in the monarchy, where one (at the time of writing) unnamed royal allegedly speculated 'how dark' Archie's skin would be, speaks precisely to how white futurity is threatened by the reproduction of mixed-race children, and how this judgement rested on the extent to which the visibility of 'mixed-raceness' might effect the purity of the royal bloodline. Meanwhile, Markle's account of feeling suicidal while pregnant with Archie due to the intense pressures of royal life – feelings which were allegedly dismissed by 'The Firm' – further demonstrate the systematic ways in which institutions and society fail to listen to Black women, or take their stories seriously. Markle's decision to speak out so publicly against the monarchy demonstrates a refusal to straightforwardly accept monarchical norms of white supremacy and patriarchy. We wait to see how Markle's story continues to play out from here in global media culture.

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