

A COMMONWEALTH PRINCESS? THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF MEGHAN MARKLE'S RACE TO CONSTRUCT HER ROYAL PERSONA

JESSICA CARNIEL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

ABSTRACT

Prior to the Sussexes' departure from their roles as senior royals, there was a significant attempt to construct for the Duchess of Sussex a specific royal persona that can be summarized as the "Commonwealth Princess". There were two main purposes to this persona. The first was to use both the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and their popularity to leverage a more modern face to monarchy in the Commonwealth. The second purpose, stemming from this, was to maintain and strengthen contemporary relations with Commonwealth nations. Markle's biracial identity was an important part of this strategy and persona as it became a means to connect to colonised people of colour.

KEY WORDS

Race; Colonialism; Celebrity; Royal Persona

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex – known colloquially as Prince Harry and Meghan Markle – announced that they would be resigning from their roles as senior royals and departing from the United Kingdom. After a brief stay in Canada (Davison 2020), they eventually resettled in the United States, in Markle's home state of California (Evans & Reslin 2021). A year later, the Sussexes gave a televised interview with Oprah that set the world gossiping. One of the more salacious revelations was that a member of the British royal family had questioned their union, asking, but what would the children look like (CBS 2021; *The Sun* 2021)?¹ Meghan Markle, after all, is the first person of colour to marry into the British Royal family, a lineage complicit in the historical and ongoing colonisation of people of colour worldwide. From the outset, Markle's (bi)racial identity – as well as her national identity as an American – presented a core problematic to the Firm for constructing her royal persona, in part because the main socio-political register for reading her race was colonial in nature (Ducey & Feagin 2021; Andrews 2021; Andrews 2017; Lynch 2019).

Although these "colonial undertones" (Lynch 2019) were criticised by the Sussexes and their supporters, these undertones were also instrumentalised by both the Sussexes and the Firm (as the "business" of the British royal family is known). That is, prior to the Sussexes' departure from their roles as senior royals in early 2020, there was an ongoing attempt to

instrumentalise the Duchess of Sussex's race by the Firm as a strategy to construct a legitimate space for Meghan Markle in the eyes of the British public and the press, and, at a higher symbolic level, to maintain and strengthen contemporary relations with the Commonwealth of Nations. In this article, I argue that both Meghan Markle's celebrity and royal personas each incorporated her racial identity, but the latter instrumentalised it to construct a space for Markle that reinforced rather than challenged the royal brand (Otnes & Maclaran 2015). Critical race theory (CRT) further illuminates how public personas correspond to social structures and systems, including race relations. Personas can be used to disrupt or to challenge the status quo of these relations. CRT also offers an understanding of how royal personas are constructed in a manner that is adjacent to but distinct from that of celebrity, as illustrated by Markle's transition between these two persona forms.

Markle's racial identity is referred to throughout the article as "biracial" as this is the identification Markle herself employs (Markle 2016b). She is also referred to throughout the article primarily as Meghan Markle in recognition of the distinct celebrity persona she had cultivated independently prior to her relationship with Prince Harry and of the agency she exhibited in that process (Marshall & Barbour 2015). This also allows us to conceptualise "the Duchess of Sussex", and its subset the "Commonwealth princess", as a separate royal persona that drew selectively on elements of the celebrity persona "Meghan Markle". We might hypothesise that Markle's current public persona since stepping down from royal duties is now a hybrid of the two, wherein her agency - arguably compromised by the rigidity of the royal institution and its publicity mechanisms - has been reinstated.

The article opens with a discussion of methodology, celebrity and royal personas as interrelated concepts, and the usefulness of critical race theory in thinking about the racialized British social structure that Markle entered. It then explores Markle's celebrity persona prior to her marriage, focusing specifically on the role that racial identity played in her narrativisation of self through her blog and commissioned pieces for other publications. Markle's explicit self-identification as biracial has been a point of personal agency for Markle, but it has also complicated her professional roles as both an actress and as a royal. The cultivation of the "Commonwealth princess" by the Firm as a specific role for Markle's royal persona sought to carve for her a symbolic function that made sense within the British social order of monarchy and colonialism, but that did not subvert it.

METHODOLOGY

We can identify two phases in Markle's persona work prior to her departure from royal duties in 2020: her celebrity phase and her royal phase; her persona work following the Sussexes' departure from their roles as senior royals signals a third phase that is not dealt with in this article. As persona is a mediatized phenomenon, this study focuses on publicly available media texts that contribute to an understanding of how Meghan Markle's celebrity and royal personas have been both constructed and received. This includes sources authored by Markle herself, such as her blog and commissioned magazine articles, social media accounts, official websites for members of the royal family, print and television interviews, and media commentary. The division between texts that contribute to her celebrity persona and those that contribute to her royal persona are roughly chronological, with the demarcation between the two personas located at the point where Markle's blog and personal social media accounts were closed in 2017. This was widely - and correctly - interpreted as preparation for her new role as a member of the royal family.

Markle's blog, *The Tig*, and her articles are particularly useful for understanding her celebrity persona prior to her marriage. Her article for *Darling*, titled "It's All Enough" (Markle 2018; originally published 2015) reflects on the relationship between ambition and self-fulfilment. The first *ELLE* article, "I'm More Than An Other" (Markle 2016b; originally published 2015), articulates her biracial identity. The publication of Markle's second *ELLE* article, "With Fame Comes Opportunity, But Also A Responsibility" (2016a), coincides with Prince Harry's first statement admonishing the press' treatment of his partner (Vallance 2016). This second *ELLE* article, together with *The Tig*, are particularly useful artefacts to examine in understanding Markle's pre-royal celebrity persona as they are her own public articulations of self, identity, and image.

The Tig ran from 2014 until 2017. It was self-described as "a hub for the discerning palate - those with a hunger for food, travel, fashion & beauty" (*The Tig* 2017). Markle (2018) also described it as something that "has given me a space to share my own words, to have my own voice". In its first year, *The Tig* made "Best of the Web" lists for both *ELLE* and *InStyle*. An article in *Cosmopolitan* later suggested that *The Tig* "was well on its way to becoming the next Goop—or at least *Preserve*" (Barbour 2020), referring to lifestyle blogs by actresses Gwyneth Paltrow and Blake Lively, echoing an earlier assessment by *Vanity Fair* (Duboff 2017). Such blogs, Ana Jorge (2020) argues, use the narration of everyday lives to assist celebrities in the creation of an authentic persona for their audiences and fans. In an interview with *InStyle* magazine regarding the blog's launch, Markle emphasises this notion of authenticity: "I figured that if I was going to start something that was an extension of me, it really needed to feel organic, so I decided to do it myself—I write all of the content myself in order to keep the content feeling authentic" (Meepos 2014). Authenticity is, as Sarah McRae (2017, p. 24) has found, carefully monitored by blog audiences who can turn on bloggers whose "authenticity labour becomes too laboured," as this is interpreted as a marker of inauthenticity. She suggests that although persona studies' important contribution to cultural studies scholarship is its renewed emphasis on personal agency over "collective configurations of meaning" (Moore & Barbour 2015, p. 8), the incorporation of feedback from publics "can add productive nuance to considerations of the decisions that go into persona work" (McRae 2017, p. 15).

Without an ethnographic engagement with Markle's fans, perceptions of her persona and authenticity labour are gleaned from media responses to her blog. While tabloids scanned the blog for missteps and inauthenticity (see, for example, Elser 2021), fashion and culture sites (arguably Markle's most consistent media allies) praised the quality of its content, drawing on notions of authenticity and personal insight. *Vogue Australia*, for example, frame it as "partly a hobby in that we didn't see any evidence of her commercialising the blog and yet it was regularly updated and featured everything from delicious recipes to her latest musings on female empowerment" (Gay 2020). Duboff's (2017) analysis of the blog soon after Markle's relationship with Prince Harry was revealed concludes: "Upon analysis, a theme emerges: Markle seems pretty low-key! For the most part, Markle comes off as a practical (if occasionally quite whimsical), individual".

The second phase of Markle's persona, that of the royal persona and its Commonwealth princess iteration, is constructed from media reportage, commentary and the select few interviews she has conducted since her engagement and marriage. While "persona work" (Marshall, Barbour & Moore 2019, p. 3) for high profile individuals is often conducted by teams of professional support staff, such as publicists and managers, for celebrities as much as for royals, the modern British royal family is known for its careful mediation of its public image (Chaney 2001). That Markle's blog and social media accounts were closed shortly before her engagement indicates a handing-over of that persona work to her royal staff. With the exception

of the handful of interviews Markle conducted following her engagement, analysis of this royal persona rests predominantly on media reportage, commentary, and official social media accounts for the Sussexes.

PUBLIC PERSONA: FROM CELEBRITY TO ROYAL

While there is a substantial body of work in celebrity studies engaged with royalty as a particular iteration of celebrity (see, for example, Rojek 2001; Turner 2004; Bennett 2011; Logan, Hamilton & Hewer 2013; Randall-Moon 2017), similar work in persona studies is relatively new. Meghan Markle presents an interesting case to examine from the perspectives of both celebrity studies and persona studies, illustrating at once the slippage between the two areas and the unique critical possibilities each offers.

The concept of celebrity rests upon a notion of fame that can be experienced and enacted at varying levels. Chris Rojek's (2001) typology of celebrity comprises three categories: celebrity that is achieved through talent and accomplishment, celebrity that is attributed through media manufacturing (such as but not limited to reality television celebrities), and ascribed celebrity, that is, fame achieved through heredity rather than talent, skill, or accomplishment; royals fall into this third category. While this understanding of celebrity might readily apply to Prince William and Prince Harry, its application to their commoner wives is less straightforward. Furthermore, unlike Kate Middleton, Meghan Markle had attained her own celebrity status prior to her relationship. As a working actress, Markle was undoubtedly successful but her "celebrity" was minor; as she herself describes, had "never been part of tabloid culture", living a "relatively quiet life even though [she] was so focused on [her] job" (Messer & Rothman 2017). This is also reflected in some dimensions of Markle's public reception. For example, the school-aged girls in Yelin and Paule's (2021) study distinguished between achieved and ascribed celebrity. They responded positively to Markle precisely because they perceived her to be opposite (hardworking, black, and a successful celebrity-through-accomplishment) to their perceptions of the royal family (white, lazy, and ineffectual).

The concept of persona is arguably more useful than celebrity for examining the public selves of the British royal family. Persona is not contingent upon fame, but it does share with the concept of celebrity a critical tension between the public and the private, and ideas of mediation and construction. Persona is something arguably practiced by most, if not all, members of (post)modern society as they negotiate the presentation of self in an increasingly mediatised society. Marshall, Barbour, and Moore (2019, p. 238) define persona as a "strategic public identity that is neither the true individual nor a false individual...It is a performance of the self for strategies to be used in some public setting". They emphasise that persona is not synonymous with celebrity, but argue for an understanding of celebrity as a subset of persona (Marshall, Barbour & Moore 2019, p. 4). In addition to how their celebrity is attained, the royal family's symbolic status in British society necessitates the cultivation of a public identity that serves their symbolic role in a manner that differs from standard celebrity (Maclaran & Otnes 2020). These public identities are constructed differently for each member of the senior royal ranks, particularly if we consider their assignment of duties as both aligning to and reinforcing their designated persona. Perhaps the best equivalent is Marshall, Barbour, and Moore's (2019, p. 3) example of the politician whose persona might be constructed to strengthen their appeal to the specifics of their constituency. Royals, however, differ yet again. Unlike politicians, they are not elected to their role so do not have to appeal to constituents in quite the same way. Nevertheless, in an era where the institution of the monarchy is frequently questioned and debated, the Firm has a vested interest in cultivating and maintaining personas that reinforce

the monarchy's significance and relevance to modern British and Commonwealth societies (Turner 2004; Randall-Moon 2017; Maclaran & Otnes 2020).

Understanding celebrity via its relationship to persona places focus on the practices and processes of constructing and presenting a public self within the particular cultural and economic context of the celebrity industry (Turner 2004). Similarly, thinking about royal celebrity and royal persona highlights the specific context of the British royal family as its own peculiar industry. The Firm (the 'business' of the royal family, including the professional support staff that manage their image, among other things) is differentiated from the family (that is, the very human people related to one another), and the institution (the symbolic function of the monarchy that impacts the business decisions made by the Firm). Royal personas are shaped by the needs and requirements of the Firm and the institution. Ideally, each individual person should contribute to and be consistent within the royal brand (Otnes & Maclaran 2015), which Maclaran and Otnes (2020, p. 14) characterize as "one of the world's most famous heritage brands". The entry of Markle into the royal family highlighted the ethno-racial dimension of that concept of heritage, necessitating the development of a royal persona that could help align that heritage with the extant brand.

EXAMINING BRITISH SOCIETY VIA CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Although critical race theory (CRT), originating in the United States, has struggled to gain cache in British scholarship (Meghji 2020), it is nevertheless useful for analysing the dynamics of race and the social structure of race in British society. This, in turn, illuminates how Markle's racial identity presented a challenge to public perceptions of the monarchy and its heritage.

Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris (2017, pp. 8-9) identify three main tenets to CRT. First, racism is ordinary: that is, it is part of the everyday fabric of social life and therefore difficult to address as its ordinariness can render it almost invisible to those who do not wish to see it. Second, it is driven by material determinism, which means that those that benefit from it - both white elites, who benefit materially, and working-class whites, who benefit psychically - have little incentive to eradicate it. Third, it posits race and racism as the products of social thought and relations. This forms the activist impetus of CRT as social thought and relations can be changed, but such change needs to work against both the ordinariness of racism and the unwillingness of those who benefit from it to change the status quo. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's contribution to CRT, the "racialised social system", is particularly useful for understanding how race and persona intersect. He argues that "racialisation forms a real structure — that racialised groups are hierarchically ordered and 'social relations' and 'practices' emerge that fit the position of the groups in the racial regime" (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 75).

In seeking to find a place for CRT in understanding British society, sociologist Ali Meghji (2020, p. 352; original emphasis) draws specifically on Bonilla-Silva's racialised social system to argue that "race is a central principle of vision in British social space". They highlight several instances of microaggressions against Black Brits: Black politicians mistaken for cleaners in Parliament, Black celebrities eyed askance in the first-class carriage of a train, and Black alumni treated suspiciously when visiting their top tier universities. In addition to illustrating the mundaneness of racism, Meghji's examples all hold something important in common: the Black individuals are perceived to be transgressing elite spaces of British society that have been historically constructed as White. The British royal family is such a space par excellence, so it is perhaps unsurprising that Meghan Markle was perceived as an interloper in that space, particularly in media reportage (see also Ducey & Feagin 2021).

Within a week of their courtship being made public in 2016, Prince Harry felt compelled to release an official statement via his Communications Secretary condemning both media and public commentary on Markle as “the smear on the front page of a national newspaper; the racial undertones of comment pieces; and the outright sexism and racism of social media trolls and web article comments” and the numerous instances of invasion of privacy and even safety for Markle, her family, and her friends (Vallance 2016). In their first post-engagement interview with the BBC, Markle characterised the fixation on her race by the media as “disheartening” (Messer & Rothman 2017).

Despite this public intervention, the vitriol against Markle continued. In March 2019, the Royal Family, Clarence House, and Kensington Palace released a set of social media community guidelines for their social media channels. Both the Duchess of Cornwall and the Duchess of Sussex in particular had been the subject of sexist and racist comments. In October that year, Prince Harry yet again made a statement on the British press’ treatment of his wife, connecting it also to the death of his mother, Princess Diana, as a result of being hounded by paparazzi (Windsor 2019). This statement coincided with the beginning of Markle’s law suit against the British tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, for publishing a letter she had written to her estranged father. A few weeks later, Markle admitted to ITV’s Tom Bradby, who is also a friend of Prince Harry’s, that she had been struggling to cope with the media scrutiny while also adapting to her new roles both as a mother and as member of the royal family (ITV 2019). Later that month, 72 women British MPs signed an open letter to the Duchess of Sussex to express their solidarity with her in her battle against the British press. They specifically call out “what can only be described as outdated, colonial undertones” to the stories in the press (Lynch 2019).

Markle’s entry into British society coincides with a period of heightened tensions around immigration, xenophobia, and amplified British exceptionalism, of which Brexit is arguably a symptom rather than a cause. Claire Alexander and Bridget Byrne (2020, p. 9) observe that the last British census in 2011 revealed an ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse Britain where “migration and multiculturalism form part of the mundane fabric of everyday life,” yet highlight that a deeper examination of British society reveals how social structures and attitudes have still not yet adjusted to address ongoing issues of racial and ethnic inequality, discrimination, and racism. As Paul Gilroy (2002, p. xii) observes in the revised introduction to his germinal *Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (original 1987), “Today, Britain’s black and other minority settlers still constitute a problem”.

Markle’s race certainly seemed to constitute a “problem” for many. Rachael McLennan (2021) engages with the metaphor of a “wrinkle”, used in a *Vanity Fair* profile of Markle, to explore the challenge Markle’s biracial identity represented to British society and the royal family. Wrinkles, McLennan (2021, p. 1) explains, are “disruptive, and must be ‘resolved’”, yet they are also considered minor issues that are smoothed over. As a result, it:

reduces the complexities of the inclusion of a biracial woman in the British royal family to a ‘wrinkle,’ a minor issue that glosses over racism in relation to the royal family as institution, and in relation to British cultural attitudes. (McLennan 2021, p. 2)

Maria Pramaggiore and Páraic Kerrigan also use the notion of disruption. They argue that Markle was branded almost from the outset as a “disruptive duchess” that was furthermore imbued with “a not-so veiled racism through the longstanding trope of Angry Black Women” (Pramaggiore & Kerrigan 2021, p. 1). The idea of disruption is, of course, not part of the official persona constructed for the Duchess of Sussex, but it is arguably an element of Markle’s pre-duchess persona. After all, a dedication to social justice and humanitarianism requires an

element of disruption to social structures and attitudes that perpetuate inequality. Importantly, Pramaggiore and Kerrigan's (2021, p. 4) analysis extends beyond the idea of Markle's race or even her politics as disruptive to highlight how Markle *herself* is framed as disruptive and centred within royal family drama to "downplay...the ways her intersectional identities and humanitarian work enable her to speak to structural racism and gendered inequality on the global stage".

Conversely, Markle's disruptiveness has also be framed positively. Yelin and Paule (2021, p. 2) suggest that Markle "represents an intervention into a 'princess culture' that is repressively class, gendered and racialised". Similarly, Connor (2021, p. 5) observes that "Meghan Markle's entry into the monarchy as a woman of colour and potential 'disruptor' represented an important challenge to the status quo", although she also cautions against reifying her influence too much as Markle's actual (as opposed to symbolic) power in the system is minimal, as also argued by Buggs (2021) and Andrews (2021).

Some public commentators optimistically heralded the union as a shift toward a modern British monarchy. For example, British MP David Lammy (2018) tweeted of the wedding, "A beautiful service and a beautiful couple. Making my beautiful mixed heritage family's shoulders stand a little taller. Against the odds a great new symbol of all that is still possible and hopeful in modern Britain". Writing in British *Vogue* before the Sussex wedding, Afua Hirsch describes Markle's experiences growing up biracial as "powerfully resonant with [her] own" (Hirsch & Croft 2018). She highlights how the royal family function as "a blank canvas on to which we, as British people, paint our feelings, fantasies, fears and identities" (Hirsch & Croft 2018); the implication is that Markle opens up that projection for all Brits, not just those who are White. Hirsch's (2018) commentary in *Time* is somewhat more circumspect, observing, "There is discernible weariness among some black British people that the idea of a biracial woman's joining the royal family would make any discernible difference to race in Britain, where the odds remain stacked against people of color". By the time of their departure from their senior royal roles, Hirsch (2020) was "not at all surprised" that "the racism of the British establishment" had driven Markle out. The importance of race in their conceptualisation of modernity positions traditional structures that maintain White hierarchies as outdated.

MORE THAN AN OTHER: MARKLE'S ARTICULATION OF A BIRACIAL SELF

Writing for *ELLE* magazine in 2015, Markle articulated the challenges of her biracial identity in American society and as an actress. Although it was not her first foray into the topic - it regularly surfaced in her personal posts on *The Tig* - the essay marks her most in-depth and widely published exploration of her identity. She wrote, "I wasn't black enough for the black roles and I wasn't white enough for the white ones, leaving me somewhere in the middle as the ethnic chameleon who couldn't book a job" (Markle 2016b). Early in the essay, Markle recalls being told by her seventh-grade teacher to check "Caucasian" in a class census "because that is how you look, Meghan" (Markle 2016b). Although her parents were divorced by this stage, Markle's father was incensed to learn of his daughter's experience: "If that happens again, you draw your own box" (Markle 2016b). Markle uses "draw[ing her] own box" as an analogy for carving out a post-racial identity and claiming agency in this process.

Markle identifies quite explicitly as biracial. Her mother, Doria Ragland, is Black and her father, Thomas Markle, from whom she is famously estranged, is White. As the essay details, this has led to a variety of experiences that illuminate a binary racial politics in America that had not made adequate room for the realities of its people and their history. Markle embraces biraciality as a specific identity, rejecting the notion that it relegates her to "other", whether that

is in demographic categorisation or social acceptance. It is only since the 2000 US Census - several years after Markle's classroom census - that Americans were able to identify as more than one race. Studies have found that denying the option to choose a bi- or multiracial identity is "associated with lower self-esteem and decreased motivational outcomes" (Townsend et al 2012, p. 91). Certainly, Markle's (2016b) own narrative of racial identification illustrates this; she leaves the box blank, "a question mark, an absolute incomplete - much like how I felt". The essay then works to detail how Markle (2016b) was able to emerge from the "grey area surrounding [her] self-identification" to find agency and empowerment in having "a foot on both sides of the fence". As Buggs (2021, p. 2) observes, Markle's biraciality provides "agency in its ambiguity".

Yet as an actress, she was later classed as "ethnically ambiguous" (Markle 2016b), which technically opened up both Latina and Black roles to her but, as the quote above indicates, equally closed off other roles from her because she was never perceived as quite enough one thing or another to fit stereotyped expectations of characters. She credits her eventual success in *Suits* to its colourblind casting process, wherein they sought the character not an ethnic or racial type. The character of Rachel Zane was then written to be biracial around her, although not all viewers realised this until dark-skinned actor Wendell Pierce appeared as her father in the second season. Markle recalls a variety of racist responses from viewers denying that she or her character were Black to others claiming that they found her unattractive now that they knew that she was. She reflected, "The reaction was unexpected, but speaks of the undercurrent of racism that is so prevalent, especially within America" (Markle 2016b).

Despite Markle's characterisation of biraciality as a source of personal empowerment, Kehinde Andrews (2021, p. 5) cautions against "solidifying the category of mixed race". He argues that the majority of those descended from the enslaved, such as Markle herself, are likely to be mixed to some extent: "Designating someone as mixed because they have one White parent reifies the idea of race itself: that the mixing of two different heritages creates something new, different and remarkable" (Andrews 2021, p. 5). These concerns are supported by the findings of Nikki Khanna's (2011) study of biracial identities and the practice of symbolic ethnicity. Participants frequently claimed their White ethnic heritages as a means of differentiating their identities beyond the presumption of what their Blackness signified to others. That is, because their Blackness is what is initially perceived, claiming their White ethnicities becomes an important practice for articulating the complexities of their identities; the implication of this is that their Black identities are homogenous. Khanna (2011, p. 1063) concludes that participants' assertion of biracial identities "do more than navigate the existing American racial hierarchy that relegates blacks to the lowest rung; their actions also reproduce the hierarchy".

In contrast to Andrews' and Khanna's wariness of valorising mixed-race discourse, Māori scholar Helene Connor demonstrates how Markle's embrace of her mixed heritage was actually an important source of connection and kinship in the Māori reception of Meghan Markle. Connor identifies intermarriage and its resulting biraciality, characterised within the context of New Zealand's official biculturalism (Bell 2006; Sibley & Liu 2007), as important to Māori history and identity. She states, "Meghan's bi-culturalism gives her greater symbolic power, as she is seen to represent an experience of biculturalism that is relatable and, for Māori, universal" (Connor 2021, p. 2). While Connor's (2021, pp. 3-5) examples from the New Zealand reception of Markle while on the Sussexes' Commonwealth tour in late 2018 certainly support her observation, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the complexities of New Zealand's colonial and migration history and the operations of race within these. For example, Adalgisa Giorgio and Carla Houkamau's (2021) study of Māori Italians found that while participants

embraced hybridity as a source of empowerment, they were still vulnerable to racism and marginalisation from both Māori and Pakeha (settler) communities. For members of New Zealand society who share similar experiences to Giorgio and Houkamau's participants - they cite several studies about other ethnic groups that reached similar conclusions about biracial and bicultural hybridity in New Zealand (cited in Giorgio & Houkamau 2021) - Markle may indeed have represented a relatable experience of biraciality, but for others she might have represented marginalisation. Whether a source of relatability or marginalisation, Markle's mixed identity was nevertheless perceived as less extraordinary in New Zealand than it was in the United Kingdom, but also charged with an entirely different politics of race than that of the United States. The differing perspectives of Andrews and Connor as British and New Zealand scholars respectively highlight the specificity of racial politics even within the Commonwealth and it is important to emphasise that that these are examples from only two sites.

Unlike her experience with casting agents, as a member of the British royal family, there was nothing ambiguous about Markle's race. Furthermore, she was an American and a divorcee, not a historically strong position to have amongst this particular set of in-laws. Markle was thus marked by both her skin colour and her accent as Other to that elite context, and her behaviour was scrutinised for evidence of her unsuitability, more so than Kate Middleton before her, criticisms of whom were primarily (and arguably misguidedly) class-based (Lawler 2008; Repo & Yrjölä 2015). Pramaggiore and Kerrigan (2021, p. 2) observe that comparisons by the press between Markle and Wallis Simpson, the woman for whom King Edward VIII abdicated in 1936, worked to present Markle "as a threat to the very institution of the monarchy". Given this context, it was important to mitigate the narrative of Markle as a threat and instead present her as a potentially unifying figure for the Commonwealth.

THE COMMONWEALTH PRINCESS: A PERSONA TO SMOOTH THE "PROBLEM" OF MARKLE'S RACE

Prior to the Sussexes' eventual departure, the Firm's strategy seemed to be to instrumentalise precisely the aspect of Markle that was problematic: her race. If Markle's race could not be hidden, it needed to be made useful. In addition to the usefulness of connecting to a racially diverse British public, Markle's race was a potential strategy to maintain and strengthen contemporary relations with Commonwealth nations. As a Whitehall insider was reported to observe regarding a rumour that Markle would attend the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London:

The Royals pack a formidable soft power punch around the world as it is, but Meghan's presence at the summit would propel CHOGM coverage to the front pages...Which is just what we want when projecting a positive vision of Britain overseas. (Samhan 2018)

As part of the CHOGM proceedings, held one month before the Sussex wedding, it was announced that Prince Harry and Markle would take on the role of Commonwealth Youth Ambassadors (Gonzales 2018). In his inaugural speech in this role, Prince Harry emphasised an image of a youthful, environmentally-conscious, connected and, importantly, diverse Commonwealth, and deliberately mentions Meghan's excitement to be joining him in this role (Dunn 2018). The Sussexes' role in the Commonwealth was cemented with a sixteen-day tour of the Commonwealth, as well as taking on the further role of President and Vice-President of the Queen's Commonwealth Trust (Sussex Royal n.d.), which supports young people's activities toward change in their communities (Queen's Commonwealth Trust n.d.) and which was amongst the last of their official duties that they relinquished. Markle's potential - and her

willingness - to take on duties in the Commonwealth as a core part of her royal role is indicated by her wedding veil, which was embroidered with the flowers of the Commonwealth. This reportedly surprise detail apparently pleased both Prince Harry and his family (Mackelden 2018). In a 2018 HBO documentary, interestingly titled *Queen of the World*, Markle stated, “we [the Sussexes] understand how important this is for us and the role that we play, and the work that we’re going to continue to do within the Commonwealth countries” (cited in Mackelden 2018). Markle had also spoken enthusiastically about their role in the Commonwealth as early as the Sussexes’ first interview with the BBC following their engagement (Messer & Rothman 2017). That this is framed in light of her humanitarianism is, perhaps, telling of how the Commonwealth is constructed and perceived by the Firm, but these elements were also highlighted in other media coverage of Markle’s Commonwealth role (Gonzales 2018).

The optics resulting from the Sussexes’ first tour of the Commonwealth and their later tour of Africa were less problematic than those of the Cambridges’ tour in 2012. In both Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands, Prince William and Kate Middleton were carried on thrones; while this can be understood as a traditional interaction, the colonial implications are clear. As Holly Randall-Moon (2017, p. 405) observes, media reporting on Prince William’s royal visits to Commonwealth nations “focuse[s] on his ability to adapt to local (Indigenous) customs while maintaining a curative aura of divine charisma”. She argues that the use of celebrity tropes to frame Prince William “displaces the racialised and religious sovereign features of monarchy”, and further legitimises ongoing colonialism (Randall-Moon 2017, p. 405). Although the optics might be better – there were no thrones on the Sussexes’ tour – the effect of the Sussexes’ presence is not only the same but arguably more problematic because a reading of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex - and Markle specifically - as the more appropriate sovereign representatives in the Commonwealth rests upon an essentialised reading of Markle’s race.

The centrality of the Commonwealth to the Sussexes’ future role, as planned by the Firm, was foreshadowed as early as their first interview with the BBC after their engagement, and resurfaces as part of the interview with Oprah in 2021. This interview in particular indicates Markle’s willingness to inhabit the Commonwealth princess role, and her particular suitability because of her race. She frames herself as a potential role model for young girls of colour and suggests that the Firm had lost an advantage in this space:

I would meet [young women of colour] in our time in the Commonwealth, how much it meant to them to be able to see someone who looks like them... in this position. And I could never understand how it wouldn't be seen as an added benefit... and a reflection of the world today. At all times, but especially right now, to go — ‘how inclusive is that, that you can see someone who looks like you in this family, much less one who’s born into it?’ (The Sun 2021)

As Andrews (2021, pp. 3-4) argues, the royal family’s “Whiteness is not a coincidence, it is the point....Celebrating a Black princess may make us feel better, but it does not change any of the realities of structural racism”. The idea of the Commonwealth princess role for Markle – or the “post-racial princess” for Andrews (2021, p. 2) – does not solve the problematics of postcolonial race relations in either the UK or other Commonwealth nations, but in many ways reinforces them. After all, the argument that, as a princess of colour, she represents something to which young girls of colour can aspire to rests upon the maintenance of the monarchy and the Commonwealth as institutions, not their disruption or dismantling.

CONCLUSION

Meghan Markle's transition from celebrity to royal offers rich material for exploring the slippage between celebrity and persona, and the royal subset of these categories. All personas are strategic public identities (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2015), but royal personas in particular need to serve the symbolic role and status of the royal family and monarchy in British society. As a celebrity marrying into the British royal family, she brought her achieved celebrity into a context of ascribed celebrity (Rojek 2001), but perhaps more importantly, she brought with her an established celebrity persona. While royalty and celebrity might share the concept of fame, a celebrity persona does not immediately adapt into a royal persona because of the significant differences in their socio-cultural and political functions, as well as the specificities of the celebrity industry versus the institution of the monarchy and the business of the Firm.

Royal persona requires a new strategy and a reshaping of public identity to fit the requirements of not just the individual role, but the overarching brand and narrative of the royal family (Otnes & Maclaran 2015; Maclaran & Otnes 2020). Markle was both a challenge and an opportunity to those working to cultivate the royal brand and its associated personas, such as their publicity and communications staff. She was an opportunity to push a more modern face for the royal family, but she was also a challenge because, fanned by British tabloid culture, her racial identity itself signaled a transgression and disruption of the 'tradition' of the monarchy – a tradition built upon race and empire (Pramaggiore & Kerrigan 2021).

The British royal family serves as a blank canvas for the British people to project their "feelings, fantasies, fears, and identities" (Hirsch & Croft 2018). Both fears of the Other and change, and fantasies of inclusion and modernity were projected on Markle throughout her brief career as a working royal. Markle's otherness - her work ethic, her race, her nationality - positions her outside the royal family while still being an insider due to her marriage. This insider-outsider tension reflects the dynamics of Commonwealth belonging both within the United Kingdom and in those nations outside of it. Aided in part by the celebrity persona Markle had carefully curated prior to her relationship with Prince Harry, the Firm coopted Markle's existing public self, particularly her racial identity, to diffuse criticism of the royal family as outdated in the context of contemporary British society and the modern Commonwealth (Randall-Moon 2017). The Commonwealth princess iteration of Markle's royal persona signaled an instrumentalization of Markle's race by the Firm to carve for her a symbolic function that made sense within the British social order of monarchy and colonialism. Despite its appearance of modernity and progress, this persona functioned to maintain rather than to subvert the status quo.

END NOTES

¹ American journalist Christopher Andersen alleges in an unauthorised biography of the Cambridges and the Sussexes, released November 2021, that this family member was Prince Charles. Clarence House (the residence of the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall that is metonymic for official statement on behalf of these royals) has denied these claims as "fiction and not worth further comment" (Grierson 2021; Sachdeva 2021).

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, C & Byrne, B 2020, 'Introduction', in B Byrne et al (eds), *Ethnicity, race and inequality in the UK: state of the nation*, Policy Press, Bristol, pp.1–13.
- Andrews, K 2017, 'Fear of a Black Princess: Britain's Royal Racial Problem', 7 November, *Ebony*, accessed 30 November 2021, <https://www.ebony.com/news/meaghan-markle-prince-harry/>, accessed 30 November 2021.
- 2021, 'The post-racial princess: Delusions of racial progress and intersectional failures', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 84, p. 102432.
- Barbour, S 2020, "Meghan Markle's 'The Tig' Blog Is a Treasure Trove of Information About Her Personal Life", *Cosmopolitan*, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/a20145547/meghan-markle-lifestyle-blog-tig-facts-photos/>.
- Bell, A 2006, 'Bifurcation or entanglement? Settler identity and biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Continuum*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 253–268.
- Bennett, J 2011, 'Celebrity forum introduction: The royal wedding', *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 353–354.
- Bonilla-Silva, E 2015, 'More than prejudice: Restatement, reflections, and new directions in critical race theory', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 73–87.
- Buggs, SG 2021, 'Post-script—When post-racialism fails: Meghan Markle and the limits of symbolism', in *Women's Studies International Forum*, Elsevier, p.102473.
- CBS 2021, *Oprah with Meghan and Harry*, television program, CBS, 7 March.
- Chaney, D 2001, 'The Mediated Monarchy' in D Morley and K Robins (eds), *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality and Identity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 207–220.
- Connor, H ,2021, 'Māori, monarchy and Meghan Markle: An indigenous perspective', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 86, May-June, pp. 1-7.
- Davison, J 2020, ' "That was the master plan": Why Harry and Meghan were going to California – just maybe not so soon', 31 March, *CBC*, viewed 30 November 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/prince-harry-meghan-leave-canada-california-1.5515130>.
- Delgado, R, Stefancic, J & Harris, A 2017, *Critical race theory: an introduction*, New York University Press, New York.
- Duboff, J 2017, 'An Extremely Detailed Analysis of Meghan Markle's Lifestyle Blog', *Vanity Fair Blogs*, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/03/meghan-markle-tig-lifestyle-blog-analysis-prince-harry>.
- Ducey, K & Feagin, JR 2021, *Revealing Britain's Systemic Racism: The Case of Meghan Markle and the Royal Family*, Routledge.
- Dunn, C 2018, "A speech delivered by Prince Harry at the Opening of the Youth Forum, Queen Elizabeth II Centre", *The Royal Family*, 16 April, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.royal.uk/speech-delivered-prince-harry-opening-youth-forum-queen-elizabeth-ii-centre>.
- Elser, D 2021, 'Old blog post casts doubt over one of Meghan's claims during Oprah interview', *news.com.au*, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/royals/old-blog-post-casts-doubt-over-one-of-meghans-claims-during-oprah-interview/news-story/5ecc4c47dedc3d40e0a0e91e8840e66f>.
- Evans, M & Reslen, E 2021, "A Definitive History of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's Royal Relationship", *Town & Country*, 6 June, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/a9664508/prince-harry-meghan-markle-relationship/>.
- Gay, D 2020, *5 signs Meghan Markle's The Tig is coming back into our lives*, *Vogue Australia*, 16 January, viewed 17 August 2021, <https://www.vogue.com.au/celebrity/royals/5->

- [signs-meghan-markles-the-tig-is-coming-back-into-our-lives/image-gallery/0f85f0b240fea35f5cce637f874f0634](https://www.royal.gov.uk/signs-meghan-markles-the-tig-is-coming-back-into-our-lives/image-gallery/0f85f0b240fea35f5cce637f874f0634)>.
- Gilroy, P 2002, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation*, Routledge.
- Giorgio, A & Houkamau C, 2021, 'Hybrid identities: Māori Italians challenging racism and the Māori/Pākehā binary', *Social Identities*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 20–43, doi:10.1080/13504630.2020.1814723.
- Gonzales, E 2018, "Prince Harry Just Announced Meghan Markle's New Royal Role and It's Perfect For Her", *Harper's BAZAAR*, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a19830749/prince-harry-meghan-markle-commonwealth-leader/>>.
- Grierson, J 2021, 'Claim Prince Charles speculated on grandchildren's skin colour "is fiction"', 29 November, *Guardian*, viewed 30 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/29/claim-prince-charles-speculated-on-grandchildrens-skin-colour-is-fiction>.
- Hirsch, A 2018, "Why a Royal Meghan Markle Matters", *Time*, 22 May, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://time.com/5281096/meghan-markle-multicultural-britain/>>.
- 2020, "Black Britons Know Why Meghan Markle Wants Out", *The New York Times*, 9 January, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/opinion/sunday/meghan-markle-prince-harry.html>>.
- Hirsch, A & Croft, C 2018, "The Meaning Of Meghan", *British Vogue*, 18 May, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/meghan-markle-fashion>>.
- ITV News 2019, *Meghan reveals intense media spotlight has left her struggling to cope as a mum*, *ITV News*, 18 October, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.itv.com/news/2019-10-18/meghan-prince-harry-tom-bradby-itv-african-journey-documentary>>.
- Jorge, A 2020, 'Celebrity Bloggers and Vloggers', in K Ross, I Bachmann, V Cardo, S Moorti & CM Scarcelli (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, Wiley, pp. 1–7, viewed 3 June 2021, <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc004>>.
- Khanna, N 2011, 'Ethnicity and race as "symbolic": The use of ethnic and racial symbols in asserting a biracial identity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, no. 6, pp. 1049–1067.
- Lammy, D 2018, "A beautiful service...". *Twitter*, 19 May, <<https://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/997809218655805440>>.
- Lawler, S 2008, 'The middle classes and their aristocratic others: Culture as nature in classification struggles', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 245–261.
- Logan, A, Hamilton, K, & Hewer, P 2013, 'Re-fashioning Kate: the making of a celebrity princess brand', *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 41, pp. 378–383.
- Lynch, H 2019, "Women MPs from all political parties...", *Twitter*, 29 October, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://twitter.com/HollyLynch5/status/1189175248035483648?s=20>>.
- Mackelden, A 2018, "Meghan Markle's Wedding Veil Was a Sweet Surprise for Prince Harry", *Harper's BAZAAR*, 22 September, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a23376285/meghan-markle-wedding-veil-commonwealth-flowers-prince-harry-surprise/>>.
- Maclaran P & Otnes CC 2020, "We'll Never be Royals"—or Will We? Exploring Meghan Markle's Impact on the British Royal Family Brand', *Realms of Royalty: New Directions in Researching Contemporary European Monarchies*, vol. 52, pp. 7–23.
- Markle, M 2016a, "Meghan Markle for ELLE: 'With Fame Comes Opportunity, But Also A Responsibility'", *ELLE*, 8 November, viewed 17 August 2021, <<http://www.elleuk.com/life-and-culture/elle-voices/articles/a32612/meghan-markle-fame-comes-responsibility/>>.
- 2016b, "Meghan Markle: I'm More Than an 'Other'", *ELLE*, 22 December, viewed 11 August 2021, <<https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a40379/meghan-markle-im-more-than-an-other/>>. Originally published in print July 2015.

- 2018, “Meghan Markle on Why ‘Being Enough’ Changed Everything – archive”, *Darling Magazine*, 6 November, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://blog.darlingmagazine.org/meghan-markle-career/>>. Originally published in print May 2015.
- Marshall, PD & Barbour, K 2015, ‘Making Intellectual Room for Persona Studies: A New Consciousness and a Shifted Perspective’, *Persona Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/ps/article/view/464>>.
- Marshall, PD, Moore, C & Barbour, K 2015, ‘Persona as method: exploring celebrity and the public self through persona studies’, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 288–305, doi:10.1080/19392397.2015.1062649.
- Marshall PD, Moore C, & Barbour K 2019, *Persona studies : an introduction*, Wiley Blackwell.
- McLennan, R 2021, ‘A new wrinkle: Age, race and writing Meghan Markle’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Elsevier, p.102454.
- McRae S 2017, ‘Get off my internets: How anti-fans deconstruct lifestyle bloggers’ authenticity work’, *Persona Studies*, vol. 3, no.1, pp. 13–27.
- Meepos, J 2014, “Experience the World of *Suits* Star Meghan Markle’s New Lifestyle Site”, *InStyle*, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.instyle.com/news/experience-world-suits-star-meghan-markles-new-lifestyle-site-tig>>.
- Meghji, A 2020, ‘Just what is critical race theory, and what is it doing in British sociology? From “BritCrit” to the racialized social system approach’, *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 72, pp. 347–359.
- Messer, L & Rothman, M 2017, “Full transcript of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s engagement interview”, *ABC News*, 28 November, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/full-transcript-prince-harry-meghan-markles-engagement-interview/story?id=51415779>>.
- Otnes, CC & Maclaran, P 2015, *Royal Fever: The British Monarchy in Consumer Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Pramaggiore, M & Kerrigan, P 2021, ‘Brand Royal: Meghan Markle, feuding families, and disruptive duchessing in Brexit era Britain’, *Feminist Media Studies*, pp. 1–21.
- Queen’s Commonwealth Trust, n.d., “About”, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.queenscommonwealthtrust.org/about/>>.
- Randell-Moon, H 2017, ‘Thieves like us: the British monarchy, celebrity, and settler colonialism’, *Celebrity studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 393–408.
- Repo, J & Yrjölä, R 2015, “‘We’re all princesses now’: Sex, class, and neoliberal governmentality in the rise of middle-class monarchy”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 6, pp. 741–760.
- Rojek, C 2001, *Celebrity*, Reaktion, London.
- Sachdeva, M 2021, ‘Palace hits out at book identifying Prince Charles as “senior royal” who questioned Archie’s complexion’, 29 November, *Independent*, viewed 30 November 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-charles-meghan-markle-archie-complexion-b1965809.html>, accessed 30 November 2021.
- Samhan, J 2018, ‘Meghan Markle to attend Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings’ 2018, *Royal Central*, 28 January, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://royalcentral.co.uk/uk/queen/meghan-markle-to-attend-commonwealth-heads-of-government-meetings-95303/>>.
- Sibley, CG & Liu, JH 2007, ‘New Zealand = bicultural? Implicit and explicit associations between ethnicity and nationhood in the New Zealand context’, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 37, no. 6, pp. 1222–1243.
- Sussex Royal, n.d., “Strengthening the Commonwealth”, *The Official Website of The Duke & Duchess of Sussex*, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://sussexroyal.com/commonwealth/>>.
- The Sun* 2021, “Read the full transcript of Harry and Meghan’s bombshell interview with Oprah”, *The Sun*, 8 March, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14277841/meghan-markle-oprah-interview-full-transcript/>>.

- Townsend, SSM et al. 2012, 'Being mixed: Who claims a biracial identity?', *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 91–96.
- Turner, G 2004, *Understanding Celebrity*, SAGE Publications.
- Vallance, A 2016, "A Statement by the Communications Secretary to Prince Harry", *The Royal Family*, 8 November, viewed 17 August 2021, <<https://www.royal.uk/statement-communications-secretary-prince-harry>>.
- Windsor, H 2019, "Statement by The Duke of Sussex", *Sussex Official*, 1 October, viewed 5 August 2021, <<https://sussexofficial.uk/>>.
- Yelin, H & Paule, M 2021, "'The best thing about having Meghan join the royal family is that she actually has Black in her": Girls making meaning around Meghan Markle, the monarchy and meritocracy', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Elsevier, p.102456.

References presented in Reference style. Hanging format. Single spaced. No space after each entry. Duplicate names marked with M-dash. Follow Referencing Guide on PS website.