"The best thing about having Meghan join the royal family is that she actually has Black in her": Girls making meaning around the monarchy and meritocracy

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Abstract

This article examines the attitudes of state-school educated girls under contexts of neoliberal austerity at a moment when discourses surrounding inherited privilege and race intensified in popular culture. Using interviews with 50 girls aged 13-15 at the time of the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, we examine attitudes to Meghan as a public figure, institutional royalty as a concept, and Meghan's symbolic ability to bridge tensions of progression and regression around the royals. In so doing, we shed light on how girls respond to and internalise ideas about power, work and inheritance. We offer new understandings of monarchy and celebrity; and girls' negotiations with popular discourses of meritocracy and privilege. We address a dearth of empirical analyses of public perceptions of royal celebrity, and provide insights into the mediation and reception of Meghan as a new member of the monarchy and the broader inter-penetrations of race, and gender she represents. The girls' feelings about Meghan are viewed alongside celebrities who the girls discussed through royal rhetoric of queendom and bloodline: Oprah and Beyoncé. Around Meghan's celebrity dynamism the girls construct economies of royal 'work' and related meritocratic ideas of 'deserving' or 'undeserving' royals. Consistently the girls' discussions disrupt ideas of hereditary power, ultimately, calling to rescind public funding of the monarchy.

Introduction

'The hereditary principle hangs by such a precarious thread'. So warns the Queen Mother in Netflix drama *The Crown* (2020). The warning, issued to Princess Margaret, is that the monarchy must work to manage their public image to secure the confidence of their subjects and, thus, the institution's continuance (in the episode this is done by hiding royal cousins with supposed genetic 'faults' to protect the appearance of an impeccable bloodline.) While the episode and dialogue are fictional, the fate of the royal cousins is not, and we shall show how ideas of bloodline and inheritance permeate 'real life' everyday engagements with the concept of monarchy and its reproduction in the public imaginary. Surprisingly little is known about the public's attitudes towards the monarchy, even less so about the attitudes of the young people upon whom the monarchy's future popularity depends. This research goes some way to address this lack**,** examining the attitudes of state school educated girls at the time of the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, when discourses surrounding both inherited privilege and race intensified in popular culture.

Meghan's entry into the British royal family has been understood as part of the effort in image management alluded to by the (fictional) Queen Mother*,* as her feminism and status as a successful, Black female celebrity were co-opted by the monarchy to project the appearance of modernisation (Clancy and Yelin, 2018). This narrative of progress afforded the monarchy support in traditionally Republican sections of society (Bradby, 2020; Freeman, 2018), but was later jeopardised as Harry and Meghan moved to North America and resigned as senior royals, suggesting that institutional monarchy was not, in fact, a hospitable environment for Meghan as a biracial, Black woman and/or her proclaimed progressive goals (Bradby, 2020).

Media representations of Meghan demonstrated a sudden pivot from adulation to censure (Yelin and Clancy, this issue), demonstrating explicit and implicit racism, sexism and ageism (Willson, this issue; McLennan, this issue). Positive coverage centred around a misguided celebration of 'postracial' Britain Meghan is held to represent (Andrews, this issue), and her efforts to position herself as politically progressive after leaving the royal family (Clancy and Yelin). Another set of narratives that surrounded Meghan that has not been discussed elsewhere, and offers a backdrop to the celebrity values of hard-working meritocracy that concern this article, are those about Meghan's relationship with work: for example, the characterisation of her as the early-rising, hard-working, demanding 'Duchess Difficult' (Hussein, 2018), and stories that focus on her career history, especially periods of struggle or sexualisation (Allen, 2018). The subtext to these stories is a culture clash with the habitus of the upper classes, signalling classed scepticism around her appropriateness as a royal bride. We will argue how characterisations of Meghan's work history and work ethic jar with existing frameworks of royalty and inherited power, and as such were a key foundation for what the girls we spoke to saw as Meghan's appeal.

We examine attitudes towards Meghan as a public figure, and towards institutional royalty as a concept. Having grown up in a context of neoliberal austerity, we found these girls to be politically aware, sceptical of hereditary principles, and concerned about inequality and the cost of the monarchy. The study that we draw upon here, not only addresses a dearth of empirical analyses of public perceptions of royal celebrity, and the relationship between royal visibility and celebrity culture, but also interrogates the mediation and reception of Meghan as a new member of the monarchy, and the broader inter-penetrations of race, gender, power, and royalty that her star image (Dyer, 1979) represents. We reveal the ways that British school-age girls respond to, and internalise, ideas about power, privilege, royalty, work, and meritocracy. More broadly, we demonstrate young women's negotiations with the concept of inheritance through imagined racial and royal 'bloodlines'. We examine how the myths of meritocracy that underpin celebrity culture and a trend towards celebrity support for social justice issues shapes the girls' expectations of the role of a cultural figurehead. We also explore girls' navigation of the tensions between the monarchy's stated role in supporting social causes and their role in upholding a regressive status quo.

First, we will examine the girls' framings of royal celebrity, and how these relate to the girls' understanding of inherited privilege, their belief in meritocracy, and their sense of social justice. Then we examine how the girls discuss inherited privilege in terms comparable to common narratives around benefits and the undeserving poor and question of what might constitute 'deserving' royalty – a question which directly challenges the hereditary principle. We then consider Meghan's royal celebrity alongside other Black women who the girls discussed using a rhetoric of queendom: singer Beyoncé Carter-Knowles and TV personality Oprah Winfrey. Lastly we explore how the girls understand both royalty and race through the concept of 'bloodlines'. These discussions reveal the girls' capacity to disrupt traditional ideas of hereditary power, as they question upon whom it is conferred, and find the status quo lacking.

The royal family, fandom, and girls

This article is positioned to address the lack of empirical work on royalty and celebrity and especially young people's attitudes towards the monarchy, as this offers the closest indication we have of whether the popularity that secures the continuation of the royal family persists into the next generation.

It has been three decades since the last comprehensive, scholarly study into attitudes to the British royal family. Michael Billig's (1992) *Talking of the Royal Family*, shares interviews

with British families, as 'to talk about royalty is to talk of many other things… To study talk of royalty is to investigate the tones and patterns of contemporary consciousness' (Billig, 1992: vii). Much of the other scholarship that does exist focuses on more fan-like audiences who are already fervently invested in the royals, through interviews with those who have travelled to witness royal public appearances (Rowbottom, 1998; Otnes and Maclaran, 2015; Widholm and Becker, 2015). As a result, royal audiences have been frequently framed as uncritical of monarchy and the inequality it represents, using the royals to construct their sense of national identity (Nairn, 1988; Rowbottom 1998) and smoothing over envy and class differences (Rowbottom 1998; Billig, 1992; Mendick et al, 2018).

The lack of empirical audience work in the study of celebrity has been frequently lamented (Holmes, 2004; Couldry, 2004; Turner, 2010; Barnes et al, 2015). As Mendick, Allen and Harvey ask, why do 'researchers focus on fan cultures, and neglect more everyday, ambivalent and even hostile engagements with contemporary celebrity?' (2015, 374). In their conversations with teens about aspiration, Mendick et al identify 'celebrity as a site of struggle that is put to work by young people, informed by their own experiences and by their class, gender and race' (2018, 13), and find that the younger generation of royals in particular are deployed in the job of 'defusing resentment at the growing inequalities' under Conservative austerity (138). Headlines claiming the 'Duke and Duchess of Sussex are single-handedly modernising the monarchy' (Furness, 2019) 'co-opted' Meghan's feminism and the celebration of racial 'diversity' she represents to defuse resentment against the royals (Clancy and Yelin, 2018). As a Black, working woman entering the seat of British hereditary power, Meghan represents an intervention into a 'princess culture' that is repressively classed, gendered and racialised (Yelin and Clancy, 2020; McCoy Gregory, 2010; Faulkner, 1997; Shome, 2001). As the targets of this 'princess culture', the attitudes of girls in particular to such 'shifting collective imaginaries of racialised nobility' (Yelin and Clancy, 2020) illuminate how such ideas are engaged with by the people most implicated by them, especially in relation to their own gendered, classed and racialised identities.

Fandom is frequently constructed as feminised irrationality (Williamson, 2005; Williams 2011) and combines with assumptions about girl audiences particularly understood as 'at risk' (Harris, 2004; Projansky 2007), overly invested in parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Ferchaud et al, 2018) or prone to acts of collective hysteria (Duffet, 2013). Scholars of girlhood and the media have worked to redress these problematic assumptions showing instead, for example, that girls' engagements with celebrity reveal complex acts of wider meaning-making (Duits and van Romondt, 2009) and criticality in relation to gendered inequities (Keller and Ringrose, 2015). And yet, such constructions persist in media discourses of, for example, Meghan inspiring 'TOO MUCH HYSTERIA' (Chan, 2018), a heavily gendered choice of word locating emotional excess specifically in the female body (Devereux, 2014). It is in this context of gendered constructions of fandom and princess culture, and understandings of royal audiences as particularly uncritically invested, that we turn to girls themselves to better understand their negotiations of privilege, inequality, race, and celebrity in their discussions of Meghan's entry into the royal family. The racial politics of girls' fandom demand attention given the fact that mainstream representations of Black femininity frequently fail to represent the complex experiences of Black girl audiences (Lewis, 2019), audiences who use fan practices to challenge, negotiate, and actively work against racist ideologies (McPherson, 2019; Connor, 2019; Kalterfleiter and Alexander, 2019), and who are less likely to see themselves positively reflected in positions of power (Smooth and Richardson, 2019). Whilst the girls we spoke to occupy a range of ethnic and racial identities, the discussions revealed the centrality of the ways in which gender and race intersect in their engagements with women in the public eye.

Methodology

We interviewed 50 girls aged 13-15 in state schools across England in 2018 about high-profile women they regard as leaders, and about their own imagined futures in terms of decision-making roles. Semi-structured workshops spanned a period of months which happened to coincide with the royal wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. The schools were selected across diverse geographical and socio-economic settings around the country. The girls were recruited in consultation with the schools' Head of Year 10, and were representative of each school's intake in terms of ethnicity and achievement profile. We specified 'achievement' rather than social class as schools can be reluctant to make judgements on this basis, even where they have data to support such categorisation. Nonetheless, evidence indicates the link between socioeconomic status and school achievement (Sammons, 1995; Blanchett, 2008; Gillborn and Mirza, 2000), meaning a 'mixed ability' sample is likely to represent a range of backgrounds. As a result of this recruitment process, the girls we spoke to offered a range of classed, raced and regional perspectives, whether within groups or between schools.

As interviewers we remained attentive to the ways in which our status as adults, White women, and representatives of higher education were likely to be read by girls as sources of authority and to shape their responses to us. This informed our rationale for setting up dedicated, closed social media groups during and after the interview so girls could generate, share, and discuss memes and online content to try to replicate the conditions in which they collectively make and negotiate meaning (Fish 1980; Barbour, 2007). For example, a post in one of the social media groups about Beyoncé received the comment 'Fucking love her!' - a response we were unlikely to receive in a formal classroom setting as perceived adult authorities. These groups tended to be used for the sharing of images with minimal (if pleasingly disinhibited) text, thus the majority of the text cited below comes from the group workshops.

Before the workshops began, we conducted a blind survey asking girls to name female leaders they admired. During the workshops, we offered prompt questions around gender, power, and the opportunities they desired for themselves. We did not mention any specific public figures; the celebrities discussed in this article were all raised in conversation by the girls themselves. Indeed, Meghan and the royal family only arose in conversation following a discussion of Beyoncé which drew upon the vocabulary of royalty to construct her global pop-stardom.

Unstable taxonomies of royal celebrity and girls' desire for positive social change

The girls' discussions of Meghan demonstrated the complexities of royal and celebrity status within wider neoliberal contexts where success and privilege are accounted for through myths of meritocracy. Straddling celebrity and royalty, Meghan brings the myths of meritocracy that underpin celebrity culture (Littler, 2004) into contact with the institution which most enshrines inherited power and wealth. The girls were acutely aware of Meghan's special status as celebrity and royal. Meghan's celebrity power was seen to have been newly cemented by her royal status, with one girl marvelling that 'people have slept on the floor for this girl!' The royal family were not seen as celebrities: 'I wouldn't say they are celebrities - they are just well-known'. They were felt to need their own distinct categorisation: 'I think the royal family is a different category altogether, isn't it?' Meghan was seen as Other to the royals (Said, 1978; Ahmed, 2010): 'Not going to lie, when Megan Markle came inside the Prince's life, everything started to change. […] She's actually helping people outside. She's not really with them [the royal family], she is more the person outside the family'. Hostile media reactions to Meghan can be understood as illustrating wider currents of racism in contemporary British society (Hirsch, 2020; Malik, 2020; Yelin and Clancy, 2020), and this Otherness perceived by the girls was implicitly racialised.

Nonetheless, it was clear that the girls we interviewed saw this as a positive quality that signalled a moment of progressive change with far-reaching ramifications.

The girls' taxonomies of royalty and celebrity chimes with Chris Rojek's three categories of celebrity: *achieved* celebrity such as actors, based upon talent and accomplishment, *attributed* celebrity such as reality TV stars, manufactured by the media, and *ascribed* celebrity which, as in cases of royal fame, is a product of bloodline (2001). As Yelin has argued (2016), such distinctions regressively reproduce cultural assumptions about who *deserves* fame and its rewards, with value judgements which do more to police than to describe the boundaries of celebrity (often along gendered, classed, and racialised lines). Meghan's royal celebrity demonstrates the inadequacy of such neat categories in a star image where royalty, acting talent, and the gossiped-about private life comfortably fuse all three. Despite their identification of the distinct peculiarity of royal celebrity, the girls understood such categories to be collapsible. When asked, 'Can you think of anyone who you think has inherited their leadership role?' they answered thus:

> Lois: The royal family.
>
> Phoebe: Yeah, definitely royal family.
>
> Esther: And Miley Cyrus

Through humour the girls' responses demonstrate the instability of these categories (via reference to pop star Miley Cyrus' country-singer father, Billy Ray Cyrus) and an awareness that social advantages based upon bloodline and inheritance involve both economic and symbolic capital. Scholarly debates about what distinguishes royalty versus celebrity are longstanding, often centring around Princess Diana's opening up of a more media-friendly, celebrity-informed way of conducting her royal visibility (Richards et al, 1999; Rojek, 2001; Shome 2014). By contrast, the girls understood Meghan as having earned her celebrity in her own right before she became a royal. In a discussion of the differences between 'leaders' and 'celebrities', Meghan was either decisively labelled a celebrity by our participants, or occupied both categories, something which was seen to afford greater opportunity for positive influence and change-making in society. Royalty was seen to compound and increase the influence of Meghan's celebrity status, and the likelihood that she would create positive social change.

> Amy: Both […]
>
> Laura: I'd say celebrity. She was, like, mainly a celebrity before.
>
> Amy: She was a celebrity before she [...]
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> Cess: […] I just knew her because I watched her TV shows.
>
> Zora: People would see her as a celebrity mainly, but now she kind of, she can do more.
>
> Amy: She has more influence on people now.
> Zora: Like, as a member of the royal family now, she will have to go to, like, events and do this, that, and the other. When she was a celebrity, she kind of didn't have to do it. So, like, as a member of the royal family, she can get into it and really, like, push.
> Amy: She can take on the role of a leader.

Zora: Yeah. She could take it on, but as a celebrity she has that choice.

Joining the royal family was seen as affording Meghan greater opportunity to change society, despite debate over whether royals have meaningful power, or adequately deploy their wealth and privilege for the benefit of others. This showed an understanding of how celebrity brands are built through expansion across categories, and the contradictions that arise as a result. This tension, identified by the girls in 2018, is exemplified by Harry and Meghan's departure from the royal family in 2020 which was announced with the trademark and website, Sussex Royal. Media debate ensued over whether they could be considered 'financially independent' while trading on royal credentials, culminating in the queen banning use of their HRH titles or the Sussex Royal brand. The creation of the Sussex Royal brand, in tandem with their departure from the royal family exemplify the tensions arising from royalty being both enabling and disabling: the royal *brand* is enabling (evidenced in Harry and Meghan's fight to maintain association), while the royal *structure* is disabling (as shown by their need to exit). In line with this, the girls were simultaneously aware that becoming royal might give Meghan a platform to 'do more' and highly cynical about institutional monarchy's commitment to social progress:

> Donna: Royalty are power, know better than you. Yeah, if they had power.
> Carly: Because, do you know, royalty people, all they do is they go like this [gives a comic royal wave]
> Bella: And they drink teas.
> Mel: I think the queen is overrated though.
> Bella: Yeah.
> Alesha: Sometimes, she doesn't really make a change.
> […]
> Donna: Yeah, because, like, the royal family are just, they don't even do anything. Having the royal family, everybody goes there and goes "oh hi, hi, hi" [another comic wave]
> […]
> Etta: Okay so the royal family they don't do anything because the Houses of Parliament, like the Prime Minister, that basically make all the decisions. Because, if the queen wants to do something, then she has to ask the Prime Minister if they can do it or not.

Despite their understanding of parliament as the true seat of decision-making, the girls we spoke to understood royalty as indexical to power. 'Royalty *are* power' [emphasis added], even if that power is perceived to be symbolic. As our participants occupied multiple intersections of denied agency - being young, female, state school educated, and, in some cases, girls of colour, queer, or disabled - their discussion of the monarchy as symbolic of the very concept of power was imbued with their awareness that they were commenting upon power that they lacked. Rejecting this hierarchy and reclaiming their status through the right to judge, they mocked and punctured these symbols, consoling themselves with comically condescending royal waves and the idea that they are condescended to by those who are merely impotently ceremonial. In their cheerful irreverence, the girls joked that such pointless gesturing is "all they do", along with drinking tea, that other symbol of British class so redolent with unspoken colonialism. This image of a family who 'don't even do anything' but drink tea, evokes a charge of laziness. In deeming the queen to be 'overrated' for not 'really mak[ing] a change', our participants recognised that, even if royal power is partially symbolic, royals certainly have the means to change society, and condemn them for not doing more.

'Do you know who should have the crown?' Deserving royals versus those 'just sitting there'

The girls constructed institutional monarchy as *un*deserving whilst at the same time identifying Meghan and Harry as exceptions by which they prove this rule. Meritocratic discourses of labour function to construct elites as if they 'deserve their wealth and status through [depictions] of their hard work' (Mendick et al, 2018:53). Through ideas of exceptionality, which in part draw upon Meghan's outsider status as a working actress, as a Black woman, and as hailing from the supposed 'Land of Opportunity', the girls were able to evade the irreconcilability of their investments in ideas of meritocracy and their enthusiasm for individual celebrity royals. Like Meghan, Harry is positioned as a positive contrast to his impotently ceremonial, lazy family. Harry's association with Meghan cements his popularity; the perception of Meghan as a dynamic outsider reciprocally builds upon perceptions of Harry, whose 'ordinariness is deemed to be *out of the ordinary* and thus praiseworthy' and whose popularity draws upon charity work and army service (Mendick et al, 2018:66). Just as the girls we interviewed believed becoming royal increased Meghan's potential to change society, Harry was discussed as someone who 'helps people', in contrast to their understanding of royal contributions to society more generally:

> Soph: It is a failure, but Harry has helped as well, because he's helped loads of charities, he's been in the army. He had a really bad childhood because his mum died so he had a bad life, so it's not fair, because he still helps people. [...]
> Donna: Do you know who should have the crown, Harry, not Prince Charles or whoever he is, he don't deserve it.
> Lily: Prince Charles has taken ...
> Soph: It's William.
> Donna: But William doesn't deserve.
> Alesha: Because he didn't really *do* anything, all he did was go the army.
> Lily: […] It's Prince William that don't do nothing.
> Donna: Prince William is just sitting there with his wife and ...(waves) Like this!
> Soph: Harry deserves it.
> Mel: But Harry is younger than William so he's not going to get it.
> [All talking together.]
> Donna: All William did was sit with his wife and get his wife pregnant and have more children.

Here we see discourses of 'deserving' royals versus those that 'don't do nothing', and an inversion of charges commonly levied against people on benefits – sitting around having too many children. This discourse usually hinges on cultural anxieties of a multiplying underclass, squandering collective resources through dependence upon state handouts (Tyler and Jensen, 2015; Jones, 2012), and is here upturned to question what level of social contribution represents 'doing' enough to 'deserve' the state handout of a royal stipend. It is worth noting that producing an heir is literally William and Kate's 'job', such as any royal has one. The royal 'work' of tours, photo opportunities and site visits are highly performative, manufacturing consent for their own continuation ('go[ing] to, like, events and do[ing] this, that, and the other'). Harry receives empathy for his loss of his mother Princess Diana as a child, and his military role and charity work effectively shield him from charges of doing nothing. William's story contains these same elements of loss and performed labour, but he is comparatively disliked: deemed sedentary, insufficiently active and, therefore, undeserving. The girls constructed economies of work as they discussed which kinds of work are valuable, with William deemed to be taking state money for nothing. The girls' conversations were permeated with discourses of meritocracy, which are some of the most 'prevalent social and cultural tropes of our time' (Littler, 2017:1). Littler explicates the relationship between hereditary power and the legitimising potency of meritocratic discourses of hard work: 'The rich will frequently talk about how hard they work, especially

when their money comes from unearned income, trying to offset extensive privilege by framing their activity in terms of manual labour… a necessary mode of self-presentation for contemporary entitled elites' (2017, 128). Whilst their benchmark for approving of public figures is heavily imbued with a vocabulary of meritocracy that has frequently been used to blame the poor for their poverty, the girls in our workshops pointed to, and took issue with, the limits of meritocracy in a society with hereditary power.

'Think like a queen': Beyoncé, Oprah, hardworking chosen queens, and queendom as excellence

The views of the girls on celebrities they believe to exemplify hard work offer a counterpoint illuminating how they use discourses of meritocracy to problematise the hereditary celebrity of royalty. In contrast to characterisations of monarchy as sedentarily undeserving of their privilege, the girls discussed stars they view as passionate about their work, positively changing society, and not in it 'for the money' (despite also being very rich).

Throughout their discussions, the girls offered examples of women they saw as having positive leadership qualities. Beyoncé, Michelle Obama, Malala Yousufzai, and Oprah Winfrey were discussed in terms of the girls feeling that they were better represented by those they felt had overcome discrimination. This logic extended to Ellen DeGeneres and the homophobic discrimination they saw her as overcoming to become a powerful queer woman.[1] As such, the top four answers to our survey question asking which female leaders they admired comprised three women of colour and one lesbian: Obama, Beyoncé, Yousufzai and DeGeneres.

The girls' preferences for women they perceived as overcoming discrimination and hardship were not a straightforward question of seeing themselves represented; rather, such narratives interact with their appetite for a meritocratic society. This is not merely the common, if simplifying, exhortation that representation matters, as these preferences remained regardless of our participants' own racial or sexual identities. Rather, the girls saw the uplift of marginalised groups as beneficial to all, and identified that marginalised women are forced to work harder than their White, hetero counterpoints.

Discourses of 'hard work' frequently uphold and legitimate inequality under capitalism (Littler, 2017). However, hard work was integral to the girls' vocabulary of admiration and achievement, underpinning both their criticism of monarchy and their praise of certain celebrities. American singer Beyoncé is one star whom the girls we spoke to viewed as a good leader according to these criteria of hard work and social change. The girls construct contrasting economies of work around Beyoncé and the British monarchy which hinge upon benchmarks of effort and social contribution and find the British royal family lacking on both counts: an institution that 'don't do nothing' 'doesn't deserve'. Beyoncé, with her apparent deserved high status and commitment to social change, is especially pertinent for royal comparison, as the girls we interviewed constructed her through a conceptual framing of nobility, (which then became the spur to discussions of the British royal family):

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[1] It is worth noting that this was before the July 2020 *BuzzFeed News* expose of employee allegations of harassment, racism and workplace toxicity on the set of her eponymous TV show. Yandoli, Krystie Lee (July 16, 2020). "Former Employees Say Ellen's "Be Kind" Talk Show Mantra Masks A Toxic Work Culture". *BuzzFeed News*. Yandoli, Krystie Lee (July 30, 2020). "Dozens Of Former "Ellen Show" Employees Say Executive Producers Engaged In Rampant Sexual Misconduct And Harassment".

Mel: I don't even think Beyoncé does it for the money. She just wants to be heard and wants to make a difference.

Carly: She wants women to be seen and heard, that's why everybody loves her[…]

Bella: The people that don't like Beyoncé, the only reason […] is because people were branding. You know how people were calling her the queen? That's the only reason why they get - why is she being called the queen, why are you putting tags on her? Number one, she is royalty, there is royalty in her blood.

Lily: That's true.

Bella: Yes, there is, I watched snapchat. And number two, she didn't choose the name, people gave it to her but because that's what people call her, they try and use that. That's the only thing they have on her.

In her cultural output, Beyoncé performs extreme hard work accordant with the demands of neoliberalism. The lyrics to *Formation* (2016) assert 'I work hard, I grind 'til I own it'. As bell hooks observes, 'black women are spotlighted, poised as though they are royalty', but for hooks this is 'capitalist money making' and therefore 'certainly not radical' (2016). By contrast, Emily Lordi argues that lyrics like 'Okay ladies, now let's get in formation' mobilise discourses of collective action challenging systems requiring 'people of color (especially women) hustle so hard to survive in the first place' (2017:131). Beyoncé's combination of problematic discourses of 'meritocratic' hard work with articulated goals of collective progress offers a neat rendering of the girls' existence within and use of discourses of neoliberalism to express desires for another kind of society. This reveals the tensions of progressive girlhood under neoliberalism as they expressed their desire for social justice alongside rearticulations of the frequent exhortations upon them to 'lean in'[2].

Any discussions of royalty, race and hard work must account for the fact that aristocratic wealth was produced by the dehumanising labour of enslaved Black bodies. For Black women in particular, the myth of the Black superwoman, derives from slave owners' characterisations of enslaved Black women's capacity to perform physical labour like men (Wallace, 1990). Following a neoliberal turn in hip-hop 'hustle' discourse since the 1980s (Spence, 2105), there is a 'thin line' between this particular slave-era stereotype and Beyoncé's performance of post-feminist grind culture (Chatman, 2017).

In the invocation of Beyoncé's royalty, she is constructed as a *chosen* queen, crowned by her fans in the giving of the name 'Queen Bey'. Beyoncé has worked 'to solidify this monarchical identification' (Holtzman, 2017:183), styling herself with crowns, robes, tiaras and halos and specific references to historic queens of Europe and Africa such as Queen Elizabeth, Marie Antoinette and Nefertiti. Most recently and explicitly, she released the 2020 visual album *Black is King* which offers an allegory of diasporic reclamation of culture, ancestry, selfhood, and pride through the story of an exiled African prince. Through a panoply of aesthetics of Black majesty in costume, hair, set design and performance, the film asserts Black pride and exhibits the richness, magnificence and grandeur of Black identities and histories. Such aesthetics of Black Majesty, like Meghan's presence in the palace, have the potential to 'combat the ideological violence of a colonialist world that is determined to

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[2] The term 'lean in' comes from the 2013 book by Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg. For a more detailed analysis of the neoliberal politics of this rhetoric see Rottenberg, 2018; McRobbie, 2020; Paule and Yelin, 2020)

deny the conceptual possibility, let alone the real existence, of Black royalty (Willson, this issue).

That these performances of Beyoncé's are conditional upon her global super-stardom means that they cannot be truly understood as democratic. Nonetheless, the girls' idea of a royal status conferred by the people and cemented through performance again destabilises principles of hereditary power. In her elevation to queendom, the girls we interviewed observed that Beyoncé is granted licence where other Black women receive censure:

> [Beyoncé] came to accept the award [only] wearing jewellery and nobody said anything… When Rihanna did it everyone was like, "She's dressing like a prostitute!" [Beyoncé] wore jewellery, literally just jewellery, gold chains and nobody said anything. Everyone worshipped her for that, "The queen! The queen!" If someone else does it, she's being a prostitute… a bad example.

The girls we spoke to showed awareness of unequally distributed risks of visibility especially for women of colour such as Beyoncé and Meghan, who must undertake the additional labour navigating punitive respectability politics (Harris, 2003) and their hyper-sexualisation at the hands of the press if they are to be seen as deserving.

There is ambivalence around the meaning the girls attributed to royalty or queendom. At points 'queen' appeared as something negative that people 'have on' Beyoncé: a pejorative 'label' with (sometimes racialised) connotations of a difficult 'diva' temperament (Wiedhase, 2015) - ideas invoked in the characterisation of Meghan as 'Duchess Difficult' in stories about her gruelling work ethic and timetable (Hussein, 2018). 'The queen! The queen!' is invoked as the repetitive chant of mindless, collective worship by loyal subjects – defaulting to the dominant characterisation of fandom as pathologically excessive (Williamson, 2005; Williams 2011, Duffet, 2013). Such pathologisation of the masses who coronate their chosen, deserving queens depends upon the anti-democratic, monarchic logic of inheritance wherein 'the people' cannot be trusted to elect their own leaders.

Oprah Winfrey was one Black, female celebrity who was both viewed as a good leader because she had overcome discrimination and was discussed through a lens of queendom. One girl remarked upon all that "Oprah had to go through... She was raped and then kicked out of show business and now she's one of the richest, most powerful Black women in America". As part of the online element of the research, the girls shared memes about powerful women in the public eye. One featured a photograph of Oprah and the motivational, 'meritocratic' exhortation to "Think like a queen. A queen is not afraid to fail". Of course, the queen is heavily insulated from the possibility or consequences of failure because her power is inherited and shored up by systems designed to maintain it. The exhortation then, is less to think as if one is unafraid to fail, but to think as if one were surrounded by robust safety nets that prevent failure - a reality which royal systems of enshrined inequality ensure are only available to the few. Thus, the girls' attraction to discourses of self-coronation accorded with their wider desire to disrupt monarchic structures of inherited power with something they perceive to be more meritocratic, but again their attempts at disruption remain structured by potent underlying logics of inherited power.

In contrast to 'Duchess' and 'Princess' which have the aforementioned associations of a difficult, petulant or demanding girl or woman, the rhetoric of 'Queendom' has its own vectors of signification. The contemporary, popular usage was coined by the queer Black and Latinx communities of 1980s New York ballroom culture. Writing about the queer, underground language of Polari, Paul Baker, charts how 'queen' originated as a slur rooted in misogynist, homophobic ideas about effeminacy but was reclaimed by the LGBT+ community as a term of endearment and affection (2004: 49). Etymologically, queen comes from the Old English word for woman and has since travelled both up and down our social scale: 'One form

became used to denote those at the top... (royalty, those who were best at something etc.) while the other experienced downward mobility', first being associated with 'ill-behaved' women - 'a hussy, a harlot, or strumpet' - and then 'eventually connected to homosexuality' (ibid.). Through contemporary representations like *RuPaul's Drag Race,* the superlative phrase 'Yasss Queen!' has entered the mainstream cultural lexicon as a form of encouragement and enthusiastic and celebratory support. If the cultural turn to Black majesty (Willson, this issue) typified by Beyoncé's creative motifs and reactions to Meghan's literal existence as a Black woman in the British monarchy is an expression of Black Excellence (Hilliard, 1995), then 'Yasss Queen!', is an expression of (Black and Latinx) Queer Excellence which informs the girls' usage of rhetorics of queendom and through a process of mainstreaming has come around to coronate powerful cis-women like 'Queen Bey'.

"There is royalty in her blood": royal and racial bloodlines

Attending to the ways in which discourses of bloodline surface in the girls' discussions of royalty, celebrity, inheritance, and social change is instructive in understanding the role that public figures play in shaping their understanding of social and economic structures. Lineage and pedigree are concepts which are imbricated in our understandings of both royalty and race, and, through both, have perpetuated social division and inequality (and to a lesser extent, myths of meritocracy owing to ideas of inherited ability).

Returning to the girls' discussion of Beyoncé's apocryphal royal blood, they imply that it cements her divine right to global superstardom. The concept of royal blood 'maps the circuit of aristocratic inheritance, predictably directing the flow of blood from generation to generation' (Smith, 1999:29). The crown Beyoncé inherits is that of unassailably iconic fame, democratic in its bestowal from below rather than by dynastic forebears. The discourses of royal blood as evidence of what Beyoncé deserves, however, offer further concession to hereditary logic. If Beyoncé has royal blood, her coronation by fans is more justified within, and less challenging to, structures of hereditary monarchy. *Formation's* lyrics construct Beyoncé's daughter, Blue Ivy, as her 'baby heir with baby hair and Afros' again reasserting, while making space for Blackness within, existing structures of inherited privilege, especially given Beyoncé's billionaire status (O'Malley Greenburg, 2020). As Kenan Malik argued of Meghan's entry to the British monarchy, 'making inherited privilege more "diverse"' (Malik, 2019) is hardly the most urgent form of anti-racism while our government pursues 'one of the most overtly racist policy agendas the nation has experienced in decades' (Andrews, this issue).

Where Beyoncé is celebrated for her royal blood outside of institutional monarchy, Meghan is celebrated for bringing her 'unroyal' blood into it. The girls discuss Meghan's lineage in explicitly racialised terms:

> Donna: The best thing about having Meghan join the royal family is that she actually has Black in her.

> Bella: A quarter.

> Donna: Yeah, a quarter okay, a quarter Black.

The imagined bloodlines of Meghan and Beyoncé were discussed as if they offered a source of authenticity for the narratives which circulate in each woman's star image: for Beyoncé, 'royal blood' authenticates her superstar status and perceived regal demeanour; for Meghan, its absence makes her a refreshing, more 'authentic' addition to the British royal family,

again hinging upon her perceived unroyal, outsider status with Blackness as the desired, needed quality. The girls instinctively understood the monarchy to be what Andrews terms 'one of the premier symbols of Whiteness' (this issue) and responded with glee to the destabilisation of monarchy as a racialised category. As such, Harry and Meghan's marriage is cast in the narrative tradition of '"healthy" mixing of blood across class lines [to] regenerate bloodlines that have gone stagnant [through] aristocratic obsession' (ibid., 29). However, the idea of 'mixing' blood presupposes offspring, reproducing the dominant ideas surrounding a royal bride whose purpose is to give birth (Mantel, 2013, Clancy and Yelin, this issue). Presupposition of an heir, again, reproduces the centrality of inheritance to ideas of royalty.

Whilst the enthusiasm for Meghan's representational power as a Black woman was palpable in this conversation, amongst all of the girls we spoke to, and especially the girls of colour, the language through which they expressed this sentiment - a qualification of exactly *how* Black Meghan is - reveals internalised cultural discourses which depict race as an objectified, quantifiable, biological fact of difference, rather than an oppressive social construct. Such ways of talking about race run deep in our society, with a history in racist discourses of miscegenation. Since the 19th century, fascination with 'conceits of blood purity, heredity, and inherited character' as categories of 'race' are dangerously intertwined with white-supremacist ideas about 'innate, permanent, heritable differences in both the physical and the moral and intellectual capacities of races' (Smith, 1999:29). The invention and policing of such boundaries have upheld white-supremacist hierarchies which persist today. However, despite conceiving of racialised identities in this way, in contrast to racist ideas which police against 'interracial reproduction as a threat to the supremacy of the white race' (ibid., 30), the girls' position was unequivocally pro-Black. Meghan represents deserving royalty, precisely because, being pleasingly unroyal, they believe she will 'push' and 'do more'. The discursive constructions of the (un)royal blood of both Beyoncé and Meghan reveal that the logic of inherited power is so potent in contemporary thought that it persistently structures and undermines discursive efforts to disrupt it.

Conclusion

Meghan's departure from the royal family has been widely discussed in terms of her incompatibility as a Black woman in a racist institution and nation (Hirsch, 2020; Malik 2020). The girls' approving discourses of meritocracy and hard work reveal additional incompatibilities in terms of the contrasting economies of labour she and the royal family represent. Returning to the aforementioned popular characterisations of Meghan which hinge upon her relationship with work, as well as the early-rising 'Duchess Difficult' (Hussein, 2018), and the embarrassment of sexualised self-promotion from her early career stages (Allen, 2018), there is her Hollywood glamour conflicting with William and Kate's strategic performance of normcore[3], 'Bodenesque' middle classness (Littler, 2017), and the racist inflexion of tall poppy syndrome after she 'made it' (Hirsch, 2020; Malik 2020). These examples all mobilise discourses of meritocracy which falter at the palace door. While rags to riches stories have always been fabricated around royal brides (Clancy, 2015), there is a public record of Meghan's past labour - from her role as 'Briefcase Model #24' on *Deal or no Deal*, to aspirational lifestyle blogging, to acting in *Suits* - and the continued visibility of this 'hustle' (Spence, 2015) is embarrassing to a class system which values 'ease' above all (Bourdieu, 1984). The girls liked Meghan because she sits within a framework of hardworking, Black, female celebrity success, and this is precisely why she is incompatible with royal structures in which (what the girls identify as little more than) smiling and waving is considered 'work'.

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[3] A style of dress characterised by the deliberate choice of bland, unremarkable, casual clothing.

Meghan's prior career and existing celebrity capital - her existence across unstable taxonomies of royal celebrity – are also what enable her to leave. Celebrity gives Meghan a different power base, not dependent on royal structures of power, as shown when high profile connections like Elton John and George Clooney came to her support (Furness, 2019). Meghan's acting career enables Harry to pitch her voiceover services (Ritschel, 2020), sign a lucrative programming contract with Netflix (Royston, 2020), and to produce monetised podcast *Archewell Audio* featuring celebrity guests (Vincent, 2020). Thus, her work history facilitates forms of money-making that trade in celebrity rather than royal contacts (the latter being a strategy for which Sarah Ferguson has been shamed (Bates, 2010)). This is why the Sussex Royal brand has been a site of such a power struggle. When the queen barred Harry and Meghan from using the word 'royal' in their 'branding' after their departure from the royal family, the Sussex Royal team responded by leaking to the Daily Mail that there was nothing 'legally stopping' them using the name, its use being justified because 'Harry and Archie have royal blood and no one can take that away' and reassuring that 'it's not like they want to be in the business of selling T-shirts and pencils' (Roundtree, 2010). Thus, Harry and Meghan take recourse to inherited power authenticated by bloodline, and take pains to distance themselves from the unroyal grubbiness of having to work for income, at the very moment of claiming financial independence.

In contrast to scholarship that positions royal and/or girl audiences as uncritically admiring, the girls we spoke to in turns expressed ambivalence, alienation, and outrage at the royals and the inequality they represent, undertaking complex negotiations that blended their own positionality with their often shrewd and analytical understandings of our highly stratified society. In doing so, they pose complex questions for the enactment of royal celebrity and the continued power and popularity of the royal family. At the same time, as a Black female celebrity who performs meritocratic discourses of hard work and social contribution, Meghan squarely fulfils their criteria for those who deserve high status and for whom they mobilise queer rhetorics of queendom as excellence.

The vocabulary of meritocracy formed the basis of their critique of the royal family as not deserving their wealth and power. Discussions of celebrity and royalty reveal contrasting economies of work, which hinge upon benchmarks of effort, social contribution, and overcoming disadvantage of which the royal family fall short on all counts: an institution that 'don't do nothing' 'doesn't deserve'. Meghan's relationship with work, her representation of Black female success, and her cross fertilisation of royalty and celebrity (with its discourses of meritocracy), offer a means by which these girls can construct an idea of what deserving royalty might look like. This idea is extended to Harry but no other 'blood royals' who they condemn for sitting around, drinking tea and having babies - charges commonly levied against people on benefits but are here upturned to question what level of social contribution represents 'doing' enough to 'deserve' the state handout of a royal stipend. However, with their departure from the royal family, their recourse to the language of "royal blood" and the ideas of inherited power that underpin it, and their repugnance for commercial labour, Harry and Meghan have framed their new status more within the framework of inherited power than within their meritocratic claims to be seeking financial independence.

Tensions arise as the discourses of hard work commonly used to justify inequality are used by the girls to articulate their intense desire for positive social change to bring about a more equal and fair society. What emerges are the challenges as the girls work to make sense of the many irreconcilable exhortations upon them in a society which encourages their investment in narratives about hard work as their path to success and power, whilst they are capable of identifying power structures that provide evidence to the contrary. It is in this context that Meghan provides a particularly valuable means of understanding how girls make meaning around her racialised, gendered representation and the relative role and value (or lack thereof) of monarchy and celebrity. Through analysis of their understandings of concepts such as bloodline and queendom, we have shed light on the ways that girls

respond to, and internalise, and seek to reconcile contradictory ideas about power, privilege, inheritance, work, and merit.

Ultimately the girls we spoke to wished to divest the royal family of any public funding. If media discourses surrounding Meghan's entry to the royal family deployed her popularity, racial identity, and performance of progressive politics to imply that the institution was modernising (Clancy and Yelin, 2018), these girls' responses suggest that rebranding the royal institution fails to manufacture consent for its continuation. Their indignant fury that a 'falling down' institution that belongs to the past should continue to receive public funding, and their outrage at the systematic inequality enshrined in structures of hereditary power, deserve the last word:

> Bella: Two things, number one, no three things, number one Buckingham Palace is falling down, the royal family should fall down as well. Number 2 ...
> Alesha: Oh, Miss why are they taking our money?
> Bella: Yes!
> Etta: They take 20p out of every pound we spend.
> Carly: What for?
> Bella: Every penny counts, trust me. That 20p that could buy 20 sweets.
> Mel: Why do they get our money? That's what I can't understand?

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