Introduction to Special Issue
Race, Royalty and Meghan Markle: Elites, Inequalities, and a Woman in the Public Eye
Women's Studies International Forum

Hannah Yelin* and Laura Clancy*

Fig. 1. The Piers Quadriptych by Cold War Steve (2020).

In 2020, British satirical artist Cold War Steve hosted an online exhibition featuring 'The Piers Quadriptych', a series of four works of visual art featuring UK journalist and daytime TV personality Piers Morgan (Harris, 2020). The collages show Morgan variously half-naked and surrounded by images and memorabilia of Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex. Cold War Steve is the nomme de plume of Christopher Spencer, whose parodic work typically depicts grim, dystopian, yet humorous versions of the contemporary moment we might call 'Brexit Britain'. These comprise a bricolage of figures from politics, 'low-brow' popular culture (such as the character Phil Mitchell from UK soap *Eastenders*) alongside motifs from classical art. Naming his work a 'Quadriptych', Cold War Steve is drawing upon medieval art historical convention in which a series of panels depict religious scenes to be consumed together as one overarching body of work. In 'The Piers Quadriptych', however, Cold War Steve pokes fun at the British tabloid media's fixation with Meghan Markle before, during and after the royal wedding in 2018 when she married Prince Harry. A sense of temporality is created as other men of British daytime TV such as Philip Schofield and Eamon Holmes come and go from a series of grimy, derelict, squat-like interiors and a prison cell. Cold War Steve depicts Morgan as a pathologised, obsessive superfan of Markle: he sports tattoos of her image across his body, and the posters on his dilapidated bedroom wall cut out Prince Harry's face to superimpose his own as Markle's beloved. In another image, then President of the United States Donald Trump sits with Morgan on a plastic garden chair, surrounded by Markle fan paraphernalia including a life-size cardboard cut-out. Together they watch the American television series *Suits* in which Markle, previously a well-known actress, formerly starred. Transported from the sheen and status of their

public media platforms to the uncomfortable intimacy of soiled bedrooms and idle yet obsessive celebrity spectatorship, all look dejected and inert. In aggregate these five white, middle-aged men, conjure the figure of the 'gammon', a phrase popularly used to describe the racist figure of 'white, middle-aged, furious-faced men who are heavily concentrated in the vast reaches of England's Brexit heartlands. Spitting out talking points found in fascist organs like the Daily Mail … gammon exist in a state of perpetual outrage' (Urban Dictionary, 2020).

In his column in the Daily Mail, Piers Morgan published a series of articles attacking who he refers to as Harry and 'Me-Me-Meghan Markle' (Morgan, 2019) for being 'grasping, selfish, scheming Kardashian-wannabes' (Morgan, 2020a), and denying his own racism by claiming 'Meghan and Harry haven't been criticized because of her color but because she's a selfish social climber and he's a weak whiner' (Morgan, 2020b), drawing on pejorative language repeated in right-wing discourses about young, left-wing protesters being selfish and self-serving, complaining needlessly about inequalities that they do not recognise. In 2019 Holmes' attack on Markle for being 'uppity' prompted viewer complaints to regulator, Ofcom, due to the racist connotations of a term which has historically been used in the US as an insult towards Black people who 'didn't know their place' (Weatherby, 2020). In 2020, his thinly veiled misogynoir resurfaced with accusations that Markle was 'woke, weak and manipulative' (ibid.), appropriating the African American Vernacular English term for political awareness of Black oppression and liberation. His protestations in response to the ensuing complaints precisely mirrored Morgan's, claiming ignorance of the histories of racism and recycling racist cultural tropes of the 'angry Black woman'. These racist tropes were also drawn on by Donald Trump who called Markle 'nasty' in June 2019 (Vanderhoof, 2020), in an attempt to delegitimise her criticism of him as 'divisive'. We have argued elsewhere that 'Markle has such a proliferation of discourse around her that she is a useful tool for those spreading their agendas' and that this has been capitalised upon by far-right populists through, for example, the hashtag #Megxit (Yelin and Clancy, 2020: 3). This atmosphere of proliferating discourses is created in Cold War Steve's use of the 'Quadriptych' form as a series of repetitive motifs. In 'The Piers Quadriptych', Cold War Steve addresses the fact that Morgan, Holmes and Trump are all figures who have fuelled racist and sexist discourses about Meghan Markle, and used such abuse of Markle to enhance their own celebrity capital. Cold War Steve satirises how Markle's star image becomes formed in dialogue with (and opposition to) populist apoplexy that takes issue with, and is threatened by, her existence at the intersections of American celebrity, British monarchy, progressive campaigns, 'biracial' identity, and femininity.

Representations of Markle at the time of her wedding to Prince Harry in May 2018 were largely celebratory (Clancy and Yelin, 2018). The event was a watershed moment for representations of the contemporary British monarchy: a spectacle of contradictions as two historic institutions defined by patriarchal tradition - marriage and the monarchy - met with public accolades of feminist progress and modernisation. However, in the months and years following the wedding, coverage became increasingly vitriolic, scapegoating Markle as an abject figure of gendered, classed and racialised inequalities. Cold War Steve's art combines these two contradictory impulses that Markle's star image

has inspired - both vehement adulation and vehement attack. In this way Cold War Steve is also using Markle as a symbolic vehicle for the transmission of ideas: in this instance as a shorthand for increasingly polarised political landscapes.

On 8th January 2020, Harry and Meghan announced that they would be leaving the British monarchy, instigating a fresh turning point in the timbre of debate surrounding the couple. Harry and Meghan have sought to develop their public image outside of the constraints of monarchy through paid speeches at corporate and philanthropic events, voiceovers in popular movies, and a rumoured multimillion-dollar deal with online subscription service Netflix (Sweney and Lee, 2020). They have also been increasingly politically active, with statements on Black Lives Matter and vocal opposition to the re-election of Donald Trump as US president in 2020 (see Clancy and Yelin, this issue). Thus, we see how Markle's star image carries the weight of these multiple significations: of both the ways she has been used by high profile figures of the right as a signifier of 'woke' 'identity politics', and her own capacity to speak back to/against/over them. As such, Markle as a public figure is a rich site through which to examine the gender, racial and class politics of structures such as celebrity, royalty, matrimony and the state of public discourse under the rise of populism.

This special issue

Over twenty years ago, the phenomenon surrounding Prince Harry's mother Princess Diana received interdisciplinary critique from scholars around the world for the ways in which it spoke to wider issues of gender, class, race, post/colonialism, media, celebrity and inequalities. We hope that this special issue will begin a conversation of a similar scale around a figure we see as equally deserving of analysis against the current sociopolitical landscape. The British monarchy is remarkably under-researched in academic scholarship, but the extensive proliferation of discourse around Markle calls for sustained examination of her role in the current cultural moment.

This proliferation of discourse is reflected in reactions to our first article about Markle, titled 'Meghan's Manifesto: Meghan Markle and the Co-Option of Feminism', as it sparked debate across news outlets around the world (Clancy and Yelin, 2018). We reflected upon the tone and regulatory function of these responses in our second article on Markle, 'Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts'' (Yelin and Clancy, 2020). Indeed, perhaps this special issue is both borne of the need to examine the phenomenal acceleration of discourse around Markle, and is also its own example of propelling this discourse further.

The articles in this special issue formed the basis of a symposium in London in November 2019, titled 'The Cultural Politics of Meghan Markle'. Authors presented their work either via video link or in-person, to facilitate contributions from geographically dispersed scholars at different stages in their career. As we explored above, the public response and mood towards Markle had shifted substantially since we released our original call for papers in early 2019, and less than two months after our symposium Harry and Meghan announced their departure from the British monarchy. It is worth noting that the papers in this special issue speak to different points in Harry and Meghan's

'royal journey', responding to 'Megxit' to various degrees. Regardless, the papers are all reflecting a conjunctural moment in royal history, and the ways in which Markle's image was taken up, adapted, maintained, and rejected, during this time.

There are a variety of names used to refer to Markle in this special issue, from 'Markle', to 'Meghan', to the 'Duchess of Sussex'. This array of appellations, chosen by the individual authors, signify Markle's shifting persona in the public imaginary. She has moved from celebrity, to royal, to a mixture of the two (see Yelin and Paule, this issue). She is simultaneously 'relatable', offering a point of identification for diverse people around the world, and ambiguous, where her identity is constantly in flux and therefore difficult to pin down. We have encouraged authors to use whichever name for Markle that best suits their argument, and indeed this draws on the Celebrity Studies paradigm of moving away from senses of the essential self, or an authentic self, and instead considering public figures as 'star image[s]' (Dyer, 1979) which signify various phenomena.

This issue features eight articles by ten interdisciplinary feminist scholars from across three continents in the fields of cultural history, Black studies, Maori studies, women's and gender studies, media studies, cultural studies, sociology, African American studies, literature, education, American studies, and political science. Papers respond to Markle's construction in the media and the popular imagination in relation to intersections of gender, race, age, and class, public performances of femininity and the scrutiny these receive, her position as an American actor who has married into the British royal family, and the questions these raise around nationality identity, (cultural) capital, celebrity, (post)colonialism, politics and power. Each paper takes a different perspective to the cultural and representational politics that surround these public media events and the neoliberal, commodified, sexist, racist, ageist rhetoric that circulate within them.

Kehinde Andrews' contribution interrogates representations of Markle as a 'post-racial princess'. Drawing on his own experiences doing media interviews during the royal wedding, he argues that assertions that Markle represents postracialism erase the history and present of the monarchy as 'one of the premier symbols of whiteness', reproducing long-established racial inequalities. Andrews draws on a Black feminist standpoint to argue for the limitations of Markle as a role model for Black women in Britain. This tendency to celebrate the individual as a representative of collective interests, Andrews argues, is an 'intersectional failure' which does not address related issues of (post)colonialism, class, and/or wealth. As such, he summarises that Meghan and Harry's wedding is 'the perfect example of the delusions of postracialism'.

Nicole Willson coins the term 'Black majesty' to explain the ways in which Meghan Markle has 'had to combat the ideological violence of a colonialist world that is determined to deny the conceptual possibility, let alone the real existence, of Black royalty'. Willson responds to this by sketching a cultural history of Black queendom from 19th century Queen of Haiti, Marie Louise Christophe, to contemporary American pop star, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Through this construction Willson argues

for Markle's disruptive potential alongside the potency of Black majesty as a trope which articulates 'a radical, pro-Black and woman-centric vision of the past, present and future'.

Olivia Woldemikael and Eve Woldemikael use Meghan Markle to consider representations of mixed-race individuals in the media, contrasting Markle with a number of other mixed-race celebrities and public figures, such as Barack Obama, Tiger Woods, Tracee Ellis-Ross, Jessica Pearson and Gina Torres. Woldemikael and Woldemikael interrogate how Markle's presence within the British royal family reveals faultlines and instabilities in race and racialization, while also pointing to some of the ways in which this presence is useful in reifying race as stable and fixed. In analysing Markle's self-definition and presentation as 'biracial' in contrast to her reception by media outlets and the public, Woldemikael and Woldemikael present 'biracial identity as both transgressive and limited'. Such external definitions force a representation of Markle which depoliticises racial identity, as her 'cultural and social expressions of Blackness … do not often translate into political solidarity with Blackness' but rather 'a non-radical and tolerable Blackness.'

Helene O'Connor examines Meghan Markle's 'courtship' of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a Commonwealth state. Taking a Māori perspective, O'Connor charts the public relations endeavours of the couple from the use of symbolic Māori imagery in Markle's wedding veil, to the couple's royal tour of Aotearoa/New Zealand later that year. O'Connor contrasts the 2018 royal wedding with the 1840 royal wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and considers how many Māori remain loyal to the British monarchy because of Queen Victoria's role in the creation of the Treaty of Waitangi. Similarly, she argues that Markle's bi-racial identity offers a point of identification and acknowledgement for Māori in bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand. Thus, O'Connor reveals the inherent contradictions for Aotearoa/New Zealand as a former colony of the British Empire as they negotiate their relationship with the British monarchy today.

Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin juxtapose representations of Meghan Markle's feminism with depictions of Prince Andrew in the wake of allegations that he sexually assaulted a minor. They analyse the types of feminist campaigning that have been permissible 'from within' the royal institution, revealing how Markle's royal feminism shares qualities of neoliberal and celebrity feminism. Therefore, they argue, 'royal feminism' does not critique structures of power and domination, and as such can be accommodated and even supported by the monarchy. They build upon their previous arguments (2018) that Markle's feminist star image has been 'co-opted' by the monarchy in order to present itself as modernized. In reality—as seen in the scandal around Prince Andrew—the monarchy continues to exist as a 'profoundly patriarchal' and racist institution, and indeed 'the very existence of the monarchy is a feminist issue' owing to histories of using women as vessels to produce heirs, and the ways in which monarchy still stands 'upon the subjugation of women's bodies' today.

Tessa Nunn's paper examines Markle through discourses of neoliberal healthism, which pivot on classed, racialised ideals of 'good' (white, bourgeois) femininity. Studying representations of Markle's body image, food consumption and exercise regime in UK and US media publications, Nunn argues that Markle is constructed as what Ralina Joseph calls an 'exceptional multiracial'. If healthism discourses 'promote a cult of slimness entrenched in a racist opposition between slender white women and fat Black women', Nunn suggests that Markle transcends Blackness by virtue of her performance of healthism, and in so doing these representations of Markle reproduce negative narratives about Black women's bodies as unruly.

Rachael McLennan exposes how media coverage of criticism levelled at Markle reveals her disruptive potential. Using the heuristic of the 'wrinkle', taken from coverage of Markle in the magazine *Vanity Fair,* McLennan examines how Markle's racialised and aged identity present ideological contradictions which must be 'smoothed out' if existing royal norms and power relations are to be maintained. At the same time, the 'wrinkle' of her bi-racial identity is reproduced in media commentary in order to emphasise, disapprovingly, this disruptive potential. By examining the efforts of those who write about Markle's star image to smooth out the contradictions she represents, McLennan highlights the tendency to 'obscure and maintain structural power relations, and compartmentalise identity rather than understanding categories like age, gender and race in relation'. In exploring multiple media representations of Markle, from unofficial royal biographer Andrew Morton and Markle's own writing, McLennan details how this 'wrinkle' must continually be negotiated.

Hannah Yelin and Michele Paule's article uses data from interviews with 50 state educated teenage girls at the time of the royal wedding to understand their attitude to Markle, the royal family, work and hereditary power, at a time of neoliberal austerity. Given that the girls' understanding of queendom is vested in pop-cultural figures such as Beyonce and Oprah, the girls' categorisation of Markle as simultaneously 'royal' and 'celebrity' prompts discussions of the nature of royal 'work' and meritocratic framings of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' royals. Using the girls' positioning of inheritance as both economic and biological, in terms of royal 'blood', Yelin and Paule discuss how such framings 'reveal that the logic of inherited power is so potent in contemporary thought that it persistently structures and undermines discursive efforts to disrupt it.' They point to tensions arising as the girls both mobilise neoliberal rhetoric of 'hard work' and meritocracy in their debates over inherited wealth, and seek to disrupt these structures through desires for positive social change and equality.

Lastly, we are honoured to have Shantel Gabrieal Buggs close the special issue with a postscript which responds to, and draws together, the overarching themes from across these eight interdisciplinary articles and offers further thoughts on Markle drawn from Buggs' expertise in multiracial identity and interracial relationships. As Buggs argued at the time of Harry and Meghan's engagement announcement, Markle cannot be reduced to a singular reading, as her intersectional identity of gender, class, and race means she operates as a complex and multifaceted signifier: 'While it would be irresponsible to think that this marriage will directly result in any substantive social change,

it is also important to not dismiss the power of symbols, no matter how surface level they may be' (2017).

Just as media and public discourses of Markle have shifted exponentially since we began work on this special issue, they continue to develop and expand, and Markle remains a figure who is rich for analysis at the intersections of class, gender, race, nationhood, and politics. Moreover, her treatment across popular and social media is indicative of wider issues facing women, and especially women of colour, in the public eye. The authors in this special issue offer us a richer and more nuanced rendering of Markle's public image and the significatory breadth such a figure can come to represent. In so doing, they problematise the tendency towards reductive binarism of celebration/castigation which has characterised the proliferation of discourse around Markle. The international breadth of the submissions here reflects the global scale of the reproduction of Markle's image, and demonstrates that the inequalities arising from the gendered, racialised and classed intersections she represents must be tackled globally. Together these articles expand our empirical, contextual, and conceptual understanding of the role of a figure like Markle, and of wider social currents perpetuating problematic elites and inequalities in the fraught sociopolitical context of populism.

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