"Harry has gone over to the Dark Side":
Race, Royalty and US-UK Romance in Brexit Britain

In an unprecedented move, in November 2016 the Communications Secretary of Prince Harry released a statement condemning 'the racial undertones of comment pieces' and the 'outright sexism and racism' (Knauf 2017) of social media comments regarding the Prince's relationship with self-identified biracial American Meghan Markle. Headlines like the one above, drawn from *The Telegraph* (Watson 2016) are indicative of these 'racial undertones'. Once the engagement was officially announced in November 2017, coverage continued in a similar vein: the bride's former life as an actor on the legal drama *Suits* (*USA Network*, 2011 – present) became entangled with discussions of race and racism, and the state of the monarchy in the UK. Markle is not the first divorced American to marry into the British royal family, of course. In 1936, Edward VIII abdicated to marry socialite and divorcée Wallis Simpson, who received a markedly cold reception (Pigeon 2015).

80 years on, divorce does not hold the same scandalous import today. However, the British royal family still holds significance as a point of cultural affirmation regarding the connections between family, marriage and the nation (Turner, 2012), as my analysis of the media coverage of Markle and Prince Harry's relationship in what follows evidences. Furthermore, I posit, this royal romance becomes a 'special relationship' which has to carry the weight of even more consequence emerging as it does in a period marked by the rise of nationalist politics in both the US and the UK. The British monarchy still captivates the British public, especially around occasions such as weddings and funerals. Indeed, events such as the death of Princess Diana in 1997 and the public mourning that followed can be considered 'as a performance of the nation and a vehicle for the production of a national public sphere' (Shome 2001: 324). I argue that Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle is of similar significance, if not magnitude. Markle and Prince Harry are 'arguably the most high-profile interracial relationship of the West' (Asava 2017: 1). The British monarchy, however, has long been thought of as inherently white, and is connected to how 'we' the public imagine the nation. The racial politics of the royal family, and their relation to public life, have always been complex and increasingly a site of contestation. As Michael Billig argued in his 2004 study of nationalism in the UK, the British public still thinks that 'the nation should be represented by the image of a British, white family' (2004: 68), but this whiteness cannot be addressed, for fear of making visible the racism within the royal family. Race and racism have become renewed topics for debate after the 'Brexit vote'. After a hard-fought campaign, on 23 June 2016 the UK voted to leave the European Union. The vote was largely motivated by anti-immigration sentiments (Virdee and McGeever 2017), and the aftermath saw an increase in racist

hate crimes (Dearden 2017) and the release of a UN report that identified a 'Brexit-related' growth in racism in the UK (Gayle 2018).

A mixed-race 36-year-old American actor from an 'ordinary' background marrying into the most traditional and privileged of British institutions at this particular moment in British history can thus be mobilised to create an alternative, more progressive picture of Britain, and Markle has been examined extensively in this vein by the UK (and international) media. For this chapter, coverage from UK broadsheets (*The Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*), tabloids (*The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, the *Daily Express*), and political commentary magazines (*The Spectator* and *The New Statesman*) from the time of the royal statement in November 2016 until April 2018 was collected and analysed. This coverage reveals that Markle's entry into the royal family is used as a catalyst to work through a range of national phantasies, hopes, and anxieties related to Brexit and the kind of country the UK is and might want to become. The British monarchy experiences a revival due to its assumed modernisation through the inclusion of a woman of colour, but my analysis reveals how deeply attached to discourses of imperial nostalgia the UK media landscape is.

Race and Racism in Brexit Britain

Before delving into the Brexit politics of the media coverage, it is worth returning to the 'racial undertones' of the media coverage and its exoticising nature. Sometimes this takes in almost subtle tones, such as this *Sun* article, which claims that Markle brings 'a freshness, diversity and warmth to the chilly corridors of Buckingham Palace' (Morton 2018: 10). More explicitly, the *Daily Mail* celebrates that 'the Royal Family's perhaps rather sluggish gene pool was enriched by a talented and imaginative adventuress' (Glover 2017). And Rachel Johnson in the *Daily Mail* explains, 'Genetically, she is blessed. If there is issue from her alleged union with Prince Harry, the Windsors will thicken their watery, thin blue blood and Spencer pale skin and ginger hair with some rich and exotic DNA' (Johnson 2016). These comments allude to the purity of royal blood and lineage, a concept used to justify their elevated position (Billig, 1992), even while they are also alluding to anxieties about the royal family's limited genetic heredity. Johnson's comments present a telling mix of sexist and racist undertones. Described as 'extremely easy on the eye', Markle's contribution to the royal family is seen in biological terms, where her mixed-race 'DNA' serves to liven up the royal bloodline. Mixed-race women are regularly thought of as 'essentially transgressive and destabilizing to the hegemony', which is both 'disorienting but also exciting, hence her seductive power over white men' (Asava 2017: 19). Simultaneously, descriptions like 'adventuress' and reference to her 'exotic DNA' conjure images of Western imaginations of the (sexualised) African wilderness (Collins 2005), ready to be conquered by a representative of British colonial history, and Johnson's article is an example of the construction of the mixed-race woman

as seductress. What these comments also reveal is an anxiety about the purity not only of Markle's motives, where her character becomes a stand-in for her racial make-up. It is the purity of the royal family that is under threat, and by extension Britishness, as 'racial mixing erodes whiteness' and thus 'disproves the imagined homogeneity of the nation' (Asava 2017: 15).

Similar coding is evident in coverage of her upbringing, which is framed as a constant struggle, even though, as the daughter of a social worker and a Hollywood lighting director, she lived a solidly middle-class life. Her life trajectory, *The Sun* suggests, is emblematic of the American Dream 'of having it all, achieving her success by dint of hard work and ability' (Morton 2018). Further, the *Daily Mirror* sees a 'perceptive young schoolgirl from a broken home' who 'knew she would have to fight for what she believed in' (Alridge 2017), and Sarah Vine commands her work ethics even though she was 'brought up in less-than-ideal circumstances in a tough environment' (Vine 2017). The *Daily Mail* is even less subtle in the construction of Markle as a product of a broken black home with their headline 'Harry's girl is (almost) straight outta Compton' (Styles 2016), an area of Los Angeles associated with hip hop artists and gang crime. Place is important here: both America in general (and implicitly its racial politics) and LA in particular locate Markle as the black 'Other'. Not only do these descriptions mark her as from a background which is the opposite of the privileged upbringing of her future husband. In contrast to the overwhelming whiteness of the royal family, they also mark her as black, partly through utilising the stereotype of the strong black woman. Furthermore, the history constructed here tells a post-racial (Springer 2007) narrative of overcoming obstacles in the face of discrimination – indeed, this overcoming is proof that racial inequality no longer exists, a narrative which is then imposed on the UK.

Indeed, the new royal was instrumentalised to prove that the UK had left racism behind, contrary to numerous studies that argue the opposite (e.g. Gayle 2018). Even an incident that was often explicitly criticised in some quarters as racist and as indicative of a problematic royal history and colonialism was elsewhere understood to demonstrate progressive politics when Princess Michael wore a Blackamoore brooch to the Queen's Christmas lunch, which Markle also attended. The Blackamoore, a European art style, portrays usually African men in an often exoticised and/or subservient manner. The *Express*, however, wrote:

> What gave Princess Michael's choice of Christmas decoration particular piquancy this year of course was the fact that one of the fellow guests was Meghan Markle, Prince Harry's betrothed who, as we are constantly reminded, is mixed-race, as if that's what defines her. (Kelly 2017)

The author criticises the discussion of Markle's heritage, and hints that the constant return to her racial makeup is what is actually racist, not the brooch depicting a figure that embodies 'a political history grounded in two millennia of travel and conquest, enslavement and exile' (Bosman 2006: 124). Others suggest that 'there has been barely a ripple of dissent about Meghan Markle's engagement to Prince Harry' (Bailey 2018). Britain's monarchy, from these accounts, has left racist structures and personalities firmly in the past.

Markle's arrival, indeed, is celebrated as a sign of not only a changed British monarchy, but a changed nation. *The Sun* argues that the characteristics which previously would have excluded her from joining the royal family are now 'seen as positives, demonstrating how much our royals and our country has changed for the better' (Parsons 2017). Similarly, *The Evening Standard* understands the monarchy as 'playing its part in effecting social change' (d'Ancona 2017), and *The Telegraph* argues that the engagement is 'emblematic of a nation that has changed utterly, no longer hidebound by stuffy traditions and populated by Establishment courtiers seeking to probe Shakespeare's observation that the course of true love never did run smooth' (Anon 2017). Here, evoking Shakespeare, the quintessential British author, serves to both reject a 'stuffy past' and simultaneously embraced British cultural achievement. This complex relationship with British institutions is further explored in the *Independent*:

> They have given contemporary faces to an ancient institution and made it seem more relevant. […] Paradoxically, some of the forces which have taken us down the road of EU withdrawal – anxieties about globalisation and fear of modernity – are threatening to drive a reversion among many in British society to the insular attitudes of a bygone age. […] Is it too mad to wonder, once the Brexit dust settles, whether the younger royals may – against all the odds – represent a Britain looking forward to the future rather than an imagined past? (Gore 2017)

The article identifies nostalgia as an important factor in the vote for leaving the European Union, and acknowledges that the royal family is symbolic of that version of Britain. Indeed, an 'imperial longing to restore Britain's place in the world' (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: 1) has often been credited as one of the driving narratives behind the Brexit vote. However, this discourse of change only serves to reaffirm a sense of imperial Britain: the monarchy 'returns' to public life as a signifier of Britishness, albeit slightly (perhaps cosmetically) modernised.

Cheering Up the Nation, Uniting the Nation

Not only were the impending nuptials received by some as a sign of progress in general, news of the wedding also seemingly lifted the mood of the nation when the country was downtrodden by its

recent politics. *The Guardian* suggests it is 'no doubt a bright spark' when Britain was 'blighted by rotten politics and on the path to be broken by Brexit' (Edelstein 2017). Now, an institution that in many ways is symbolic of Britain's imperial history is meant to provide a relief from a political development that is equally symbolic of the nation's imperial nostalgia (Virdee and McGeever 2017) and brings momentary relief and respite from politics. The *Daily Mail* is excited by 'a glamorous Anglo-American wedding at a time when some in Britain feel down in the dumps over Brexit, and a bit unloved by the world' (Glover 2017). Similarly, *The Sun* compares the difference in reception between Wallis Simpson and Meghan Markle: unlike the 'full-scale constitutional crisis' caused by Simpson, this 'American divorcee is arriving just in time to unite us when we need it most' (Rinder 2017). It seems that it is not just the royal family that is cheering up the nation, but Markle's particular brand of international, American glamour. An attractive, successful American willing to marry a British prince, to become part of a British institution, and part of the British nation by extension, is seen as a sign that perhaps Britain is not completely undesirable.

Celebrating the romantic spectacle as a welcome distraction from everyday politics, indeed, serves to unite the country. *The Telegraph* refers to the wedding as 'a great national occasion' and encourages us 'to celebrate as a nation' (Anon 2017). Very little room is left for rejection of or indifference to the events, and when rejection (for example, from republicans) is anticipated, this is framed in decidedly negative terms. Constructing dissenting voices as outsiders, the *Scottish Daily Mail* writes: 'The rest of us, of course, see things very differently – those of us who do not take ourselves too seriously' (MacLeod 2017). Similarly, the publication's national edition elaborates: 'Most sane, patriotic people, though, will simply get on with enjoying the party' (Sandbrook 2017). Uniting behind the monarchy is equated with love for one's country, which is portrayed as 'sane', ergo the 'normal' way of feeling about these events. The British monarchy here functions as an integral part of British identity, and not joining in the celebrations signifies a lack of identification with the nation, as well as a generally objectionable dourness.

What this kind of coverage creates is an imagined community (Anderson 1983) that unites in celebrating the happy couple. Royal events like weddings 'revivify our own memory of marriage, of our connection to our parents and grandparents […] and they form a connection, however fragile and unclear, between family and nation' (Turner 2012: 88). This unity is the very purpose of the royal family in 21st century democracies. Further, Turner suggests that 'the real value of constitutional monarchy is that in times of great crisis it can provide the illusion of stability' (Turner 2012: 86) in contrast to impermanent parliamentary politics. The ritualistic nature of royal weddings provides the illusion of stability and reminds the country of its history during the uncertainty of parliamentary Brexit politics and a currently unpredictable future.

More significantly, in the context of the political divisions emanating from Brexit, is the royal wedding's perceived ability to reaffirm the UK's unity as a union of four nations. The *Daily*

Mail suggests that the wedding 'will be a chance for the United Kingdom's four nations to remember the ties of history and culture that still bind us' (Sandbrook 2017). However, this also highlights that the use of the unifying term Britain, both in the context of the monarchy and Brexit, can be misleading. While England and Wales voted to leave the EU, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain, and this has since posed constitutional challenges throughout the withdrawal process. A similar divide emerges in the media and public attention to the royal wedding. The *Sunday Herald* describes the reaction north of Hadrian's Wall as 'a massive yawn, if pollster YouGov is to be believed' with 62 per cent of Scots 'indifferent to the upcoming royal wedding, the highest percentage among any group polled' (Didcock 2017). Indeed, *The Scotsman* suggests increased royal coverage in the British media is part of the glorification of a past Britain, arguing that 'in these Brexit times, this re-charged royalism seems to come as part of a package of retro-nationalist nostalgia, a whole narrative of Britain's return to a more red-and-white and blue, pre-European Union identity' (McMillan 2017). The intense fascination with the royal family is identified as a distinctively English phenomenon, not a generally British one, and one that shows a regressive fondness for past imperial 'greatness' rather than the progressive politics championed in the coverage of Markle. Remarkably, this article names the current English political and cultural climate 'retro-nationalist nostalgia' –current developments are not called patriotism, as for example the *Daily Mail* does above, but *nationalism*, which has much more negative connotations (Viroli 1995) as an ideology that often incorporates feelings of superiority over and exclusion of other nations. Coverage of the royal wedding then serves to present a unified image of the UK, and at the same time make visible the divisions operating in the country.

The Transatlantic Politics of Wedding Invitations

It is not only on the national stage that the wedding reveals ongoing political tensions and issues of contestation – the role of the royals has also increased in the realm of international relations. While royals like Prince William have already been sent on European Brexit tours to for example Denmark to raise the UK's profile abroad (Grippler 2018), the coverage of Meghan Markle has mainly focused on the American connection (and, as explored further below, the Commonwealth). UK and US politics often develop in similar ways, but few developments in recent history have seemed as similar as the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, both in 2016 (Wilson 2017) – and both are developments which have a longing for the past and anti-immigration sentiments at their hearts. Although the UK and the US seem to be united in their political trend, this, so far, has not resulted in a visibly successful reaffirmation of the 'special relationship' (Wilson 2017).

Instead, *The Sunday Telegraph* hopes that Meghan Markle 'may even be able to improve the "special relationship"' (Walter 2017). This signifies a personalisation of politics and is further developed in discussions around the royal wedding, and the wedding dress in particular. Markle's

entry into the royal family is considered part of a wider effort to modernise the British monarchy. As such the *Evening Standard* acknowledged the wedding's marketing potential in 'the rebranding of the royal family', as in 'post-Brexit Britain, how we sell the country abroad becomes all the more important. Might [Markle] opt for an American designer to strengthen relations?' (Weir 2017). Here, the royal family is a brand that is used to advertise and promote the UK nationally and internationally (Balmer 2011) and the wedding dress becomes politicised and analysed for its potential to 'strengthen relations' with the US.

Speculations around wedding invitations are motivated by similar concerns, and rumours of the guest list were examined in relation to their diplomatic impact. Particular attention was paid to which US president would be invited: former President Barack Obama, on friendly terms with Prince Harry (Stewart 2017) or current president Donald Trump, who Markle called 'misogynistic' and 'divisive' (Oppenheim 2018). A good relationship with Trump is considered key to a fast establishment of a trade barrier-reducing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US and the UK. At the time of writing, FTAs have been a key focus of Brexit media coverage, as they are one of the main reasons for leaving the EU, the Single Market, and the Customs Union (Trommer 2017), and failure to secure FTAs quickly may be detrimental to the Brexit process. Thus Donald Trump's unpredictable and divisive approach to politics, combined with an urgent need to negotiate a post-Brexit free trade agreement with the US as quickly as possible, made for anxious coverage.

For example, the *Daily Mail* announced: 'REVEALED: HARRY WON'T INVITE OBAMA TO WEDDING', followed by concerns that the wedding 'was branded a "diplomatic time bomb" if Barack Obama was invited, but not Donald Trump' (Shakespeare 2018). The *Express* refers to the potential lack of invitation for Trump as an 'embarrassing snub' (Parfitt 2018) that could 'offend Donald Trump and damage the British national interest as we try to get a new trade deal with the Americans after Brexit' (Thalassites 2018). What these articles reveal is that the UK cannot rely on the power of the 'special relationship' alone. While the UK and the US are somewhat united in their drift towards populist and nationalist politics, these same issues have now complicated their relationship. The difficulties and management of these international relationships are then imposed on the personal relationship of an American actor and a British prince, and their wedding becomes responsible for bringing two nations together. Markle's relations with the Commonwealth are explored in similar ways. Having lived several years in Toronto while filming *Suits*, Markle has spent significant time in the Commonwealth, and this connection is exploited in media coverage of the royals and the UK's future position in the world.

The Commonwealth and the Royal Family in a post-Brexit UK

While parts of the Leave campaign mobilised the post-imperial hope that 'Britons would venture forth across the globe in the spirit of the buccaneers of the time of Elizabeth I' (Wilson 2017: 545)

in their quest for votes, again at the time of writing (May 2018) the UK government is still undecided about the direction of future relations with the EU and beyond, which makes for uncertain trade relation talks. However, one possible future avenue for increased economic and political links is the Commonwealth. As the then UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson wrote of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London in April 2018: 'Brexit will give us the ability to open a new era of friendship with countries across the world. A key theme of the London summit will be how to boost trade within the Commonwealth' (Johnson 2018). Indeed, it is part of the 'Global Britain' government strategy to foster stronger relationships with the countries of the Commonwealth. That this strategy has internally been called 'Empire 2.0' (Virdee and McGeever 2017) perhaps gives away the ideological underpinning of the project, and the ways in which Markle's relationship with the Commonwealth is covered reflect this imperial nostalgia.

The Commonwealth consists of 53 nations, many of them former colonies of the United Kingdom. In 16 of these the Queen is head of state. Holly Randell-Moon suggests that the continuing significance of a monarchy 'is often justified by the idea that a democratic state benefits from an enduring and transcendent symbol of British parliamentary and Commonwealth traditions' (Randell-Moon 2017: 397) as a unifying force. In a post-Brexit future, the UK in return hopes to benefit from the already existing ties with the Commonwealth through political alliances and increased trade, and the royal family seems to assume a key role in harvesting this goodwill. Markle herself has expressed interest in the Commonwealth, for example in the engagement interview in November 2017, during which she stated her interest in working with and travelling the Commonwealth (BBC 2017). This interest was further cemented on the day of her wedding, when she wore a veil embroidered with flowers from all 53 Commonwealth nations. Markle's first royal engagement connected to the Commonwealth was the Commonwealth Day service, followed by attendance at events at the Commonwealth summit in April 2018. Speculation around the significance of the Commonwealth to Markle's work as a royal began long before this event. On the day of the engagement announcement, the *Evening Standard* reported the Queen's plans to use the couple as 'Commonwealth super envoys' whose popularity 'will help boost post-Brexit trade and ties with nations' (Jobson 2017). The *Express* calls Markle 'The Royal Family's secret weapon' who is 'launching a Commonwealth charm offensive' (Stinson 2018). Their royal expert explains the racial politics of the new recruit:

> The fact she is biracial will have enormous appeal to many in the Commonwealth who have previously viewed the Royal Family as remote. The royals are used for "soft power" very effectively in visits abroad, this would certainly apply to the Commonwealth as it does to Europe, to promote goodwill during and after Brexit. (Stinson 2018)

Markle's racial and international background works to legitimise the increased role of the royal family in political life, in which her race is an asset to be instrumentalised in the quest for positive post-Brexit relations. Highlighting her race in this way is remarkable because 'the Brexit campaign and the subsequent Global Britain project are made more alluring precisely through the erasure of the racist underside of the actual Empire project of yesteryear' (Virdee and McGeever 2017: 4). Meghan Markle's presence is integral to the construction of this illusion. Markle can fill this role precisely because she, as a mixed-race woman, is seen to have the 'capacity to move between and among several racial identities that are interchangeable' and can utilise 'whichever identity may be situationally appropriate for a specific interactional context' (Rockquemore 2004: 129).

Part of what enables Markle to 'switch' between identities is the American Hollywood glamour she is seen to embody. Glamour is often associated with (classical) Hollywood (Wilson, 2007), and takes different forms in national contexts. In the UK, for example Princess Diana became '(almost) reigning beauty and ultimate icon of conventional "glamour"' (Wilson, 2007: 104) in a time when the UK was famous for parodies of glamour in the form of, for example, the 1980s 'New Romantics' like Boy George and Adam Ant. Markle contributes a penchant for fashion to the royal family which had been absent for over 20 years. And because the genesis of this sparkle is distinctively un-British, it helps to re-brand the monarchy as modern and with international, cosmopolitan flair.

Even more explicit markers of difference are considered charming. When, at the Commonwealth Summit, Prince Harry introduced her to the British word plaster for the American band-aid, newspaper coverage focused on the hilarity of the situation. *The Evening Standard* reported Prince Harry's jokes 'about their "language barrier"' (Coulter 2018), which prompted 'much laughter from his audience' (Blott 2018). Markle's Americanness is part of her allure, and is perhaps a 'safe' type of foreignness. This is markedly different from much (tabloid) press coverage of immigration, which recurrently paints immigrants as a foreign, invasive threat to Britain (Khosravinik, 2010; Moore, Berry and Garcia-Blanco, 2018). Indeed, *The Telegraph* points out that due to the political and cultural similarities between the US and the UK, 'an American marrying into Britain hardly counts as foreign at all' (Hannan 2017). This marks a significant change of tone to the last time an American married into the British royal family. Wallis Simpson's otherness and 'unsuitability' to the British monarchy – 'American, childless, thrice-married and sexually deviant' – positioned her as 'the antithesis of her sister-in-law --Queen Elizabeth, loving wife and dedicated mother', and therefore 'by extension, as the antithesis of Britain' (Pigeon 2015: 13). Markle is allowed some proximity to Britain and Britishness, as long as she remains charming, and any signs of difference can be rendered non-threatening. Indeed, her assimilation into Britain and Britishness is closely scrutinised. At the Commonwealth Day service Markle was seen singing the British national anthem for the first time, where 'The camera focused on the former Suits star

singing the words 'happy and glorious' during the televised event' (Collier 2018). The camera here works as an instrument to surveil Markle's entry into the royal family and Britishness, and implicitly judges how well she performs markers of national identity - the positive coverage then serves as a preliminary blessing.

It remains to be seen how the current enthusiasm holds up once the wedding sparkle wears off, and Markle will be under more scrutiny as a working royal. However, what the engagement has already demonstrated is that the UK still has a problematic and unresolved relationship with race, racism, and an imperial past that casts its shadow over current Brexit politics. With the UK struggling with its image and position in the world, the royal family and its newest member are rediscovered as a symbol of the nation and national unity. While Markle's engagement to Prince Harry in the middle of Brexit negotiations is incidental, the marketing of this occasion is not: Markle, as a woman of colour, offers the possibility of a progressive image of both monarchy and the country at a time when it is in the spotlight for its reactionary political developments. Ultimately, however, a conservative institution cannot cover up the ideological underpinnings of a deeply regressive politics, and instead only works to make visible the imperial nostalgia at the heart of Brexit.

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