

# **“How Any Woman Does What They Do is Beyond Comprehension”:**

## **Media Representations of Meghan Markle’s Maternity**

Shani Orgad and Kate Baldwin

### **Abstract**

In 2019-2020, Meghan Markle was one of the most intensely-mediated mothers in the Anglophone media. This article examines how UK and US media representations of Meghan negotiate, trouble, challenge, regulate and reassert the boundaries and meanings of contemporary motherhood. Situating Meghan’s mediated representations in the context of the increasing visibility and shifting meanings of motherhood in contemporary culture, and particularly in the context of the growing visibility of voices and accounts of “mothering while Black,” we examine the mediation of Meghan’s maternity in three moments: 1) Prince Harry’s announcement of the birth (May 2019); 2) Meghan’s public outing with the baby (July 2019), her later (September 2019) interview for an ITV documentary, and lawsuit she filed against the British tabloid *Mail on Sunday*; and 3) the royal couple’s South Africa tour (September 2019). We conclude by examining a fourth mediated moment—“Megxit” (January 2020)—and highlight the mediation of Meghan Markle’s maternity as a site that might open up a space for rewriting motherhood, and particularly Black motherhood, however limited that space may be.

### **Keywords**

Motherhood; Black maternity; maternal labor; carework; mediation

## **Introduction**

In 2013, when the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, went into labor, the front cover of the UK satirical magazine *Private Eye* displayed a three word-headline: “woman has baby”.<sup>1</sup> The headline mocks the disproportional media frenzy around and spectacularization of royal births which, six years later, was again on display—this time in relation to Meghan Markle’s maternity. From the announcement of her pregnancy in October 2018, to the birth of the royal baby Archie, to the couple’s decision in early 2020 to step back from their royal obligations, Meghan’s motherhood and mothering have been the subject of numerous news reports, social media posts, and other media representations. Indeed, in 2019-2020, Meghan Markle was one of the most intensely-mediated mothers in the English-speaking UK, US (and perhaps the global) media.

While we share the criticism of the media’s obsession with this topic—and how critically it obscures other issues, topics, and experiences—in this article we consider this obsession seriously and ask: what cultural work does the intense mediation of Meghan’s motherhood do in the current moment, especially in relation to the meanings of maternal labor? To address this question, in the first part of the article we situate the mediated representations of Meghan’s maternalism in what we describe as the contemporary shifting terrain of motherhood. In the second part, we examine how these mediated constructions negotiate, trouble, push against, and concurrently reassert the boundaries and meanings of motherhood. In the conclusion we draw together the strands of our analysis to highlight the mediation of Meghan Markle’s maternity as a site that *might* open up a space for rewriting motherhood, and particularly Black maternal labor, however limited that space currently seems.

## **The Contemporary Hypervisibility and Shifting Terrain of Motherhood**

In the last few years there has been a surge in the production and consumption of representations of maternity in popular culture and public discourse more broadly (Addison et al., 2009; Littler, 2019; Orgad, 2019; Tyler, 2011), culminating in 2020 being declared the “Year of the Mother.”<sup>2</sup> Experiences of motherhood and mothering are being expressed, depicted, discussed, and negotiated publicly and continuously, across a range of media technologies and platforms.

The recent intensified visibility of motherhood has been characterized by important changes in the depiction of mothers and motherhood, related to broader social and political changes including increased levels of education and greater participation of women in the workforce, the influence of feminism, the neoliberal crisis of social reproduction, and destabilization of the biological view of motherhood. Compared to those that marked previous eras, contemporary representations provide a more nuanced and complicated portrayal of motherhood (Littler, 2019; Orgad, 2019; Walters and Harrison, 2014). Blogs, websites, and social networking sites offer important spaces for mothers to express not just satisfaction and happiness but also powerful emotions of frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, anxiety, anger, and ingratitude. Mothers describe, talk about, and critique the unpaid, undervalued, and onerous work of mothering. Digital parenting sites allow for the articulation of complicated feelings whose expression has for long been taboo. These sites also can constitute spaces for meaningful camaraderie between and among mothers as they negotiate the meanings of motherhood in the context of intensifying neoliberalism, precarity, and social inequalities (Das, 2020; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017). In this context, the meaning of the word “mother” is continually destabilized and expanded (Briggs, 2017; Knott, 2019; Nash, 2018) and maternal labor—the historically invisible and undervalued work of mothering—is becoming increasingly visible. Thus, in contrast to traditional tropes of the selfless (white, biological, cisgender) mother who takes pleasure in and is fulfilled by bearing

and raising children, the current landscape allows for more complex depictions and voices about motherhood, mothering and the labors it entails.

It is at this critical juncture of the broader maternal visibility that attention to “mothering while Black” has significantly increased in contemporary Anglophone popular discourse. Of course, Black mothers have long expressed, discussed and contested the injustices, inequalities and risks they and other women of color who mother experience, and lamented the precarity of Black motherhood, particularly in relation to their communities and sons (Spillers, 1987; Roberts, 1991). African American women have continuously engaged in negotiating, navigating and resisting white “controlling images” and in crafting self-definitions and reconceptualizing motherhood and womanhood to reflect their own values and life experiences (Hill-Collins, 2002). However, these voices have garnered factionalized attention in mainstream Anglophone popular discourse, and have been persistently objectified, demonized, and policed, used to justify and maintain Black women’s subordination and oppression (Hill-Collins, 2002). It is only more recently, that celebrities such as Beyoncé, Serena Williams, and Cardi B have brought the experience of Black motherhood into popular conversation.<sup>3</sup> The anxieties, fears, and ambivalences surrounding mothering exposed by these and other Black women, especially in the US, have expanded within popular discourse the vocabulary with which to recognize and account for Black maternal lives. The recent visibility of Black motherhood in the popular Anglophone cultural sphere was emblemized by the debut of “Mom-in-Chief” Michelle Obama’s *Becoming*. The book hit the top spot in the *New York Times* bestseller list and remained there for twenty weeks, has been “a global sales juggernaut” (Sweney, 2019, March 26), and was adapted into a Netflix documentary. This popularity speaks to the media’s eagerness to represent, market, and commodify Black maternal work, affect, and politics (Marlo, 2016).

Nevertheless, these celebrity voices continue to overshadow the more mundane, quotidian, and diverse experiences of women of color whose lives may diverge from the overarching themes of Black celebrity. Voices as distinct and divergent as Alexis Pauline Gumbs et al. (2016), Kim McLarin (2012), Emily Bernard (2019), and Camille Dungy (2017) comb through their experiences as moms, offering portraits of heroism, failure, creativity, boredom, and anxiety. The capaciousness of the maternal landscapes they depict is both informed by and not limited to race.<sup>4</sup>

Discourses about work and the workplace are key sites of continued erasure of Black mothers and mothering, and of Black women more generally. While in recent years discussion of mothers' advancement in the workforce has assumed centerstage in the Anglophone media, Black mothers' experiences continue to be marginalized. Not only are Black women still largely absent from representations of "successful" professional women and their pursuit of a work-life balance, but, as Catherine Rottenberg (2018) notes, women of color, as well as poor and immigrant women, serve as unacknowledged careworkers whose social reproductive work enables professional women to strive towards achieving "balance" in their lives (see also Allers, 2018, March 5). Thus, the voices and bodies of certain Black mothers gain visibility, while the accounts, labors, and realities of other Black mothers continue to be invisible and invisibilized.

While the increasing visibility of motherhood in contemporary Anglophone popular culture has destabilized and expanded the narrow and exclusionary definitions of motherhood, it has simultaneously "reinvigorated the scrutiny and policing of mothers, the documenting of what mothers do and where and how they do it" (Orgad, 2019, p. 110). The ubiquitousness and toxicity of mother-blaming, mother shaming, and policing of mothers and their parenting practices in the press, popular culture, and on social media are profoundly racialized and classed. In the British media, working-class mothers, and especially poor

single mothers are regularly demonized as “benefit scroungers” who contribute nothing to the economy, are incapable of governing themselves and their children in the “right” ways, and thus are responsible for making Britain a “broken society” (De Benedictis, 2012; Jensen, 2018; McRobbie, 2013; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015; Orgad, 2019). Migrant mothers are either overlooked completely and wiped out from representations of the “migration crisis,” or are the targets of blame, lambasted and held accountable for society’s ills (Rose, 2019). In the US, mother-blaming is directed most aggressively at Black, Latinx, and Native women, depicting them as lazy, sexually loose single mothers. The trope reaches back to the 1965 Moynihan report which blamed Black mothers for the “crisis of the Negro family,” and was later reconceived in the Reagan era as the “welfare queen” trope which was perpetuated by newspapers, pundits, and policymakers (Briggs, 2017; Hill- Collins, 2002; Lubiano, 1992). In the current moment in the US, Jennifer Nash (2019) observes, Black motherhood is increasingly imagined as a space of crisis and a site of intense regulation. Notwithstanding the differences between the two national/cultural contexts, in both the UK and the US, the poor, disenfranchised failing mother is consistently vilified and denigrated against the (upper) white middle-class mother, who is frequently idealized and scrutinized for her provision of “quality mothering”, and acting responsibly.

Indeed, in parallel to the increasing visibility and recognition of Black motherhood in contemporary UK-US popular discourse, in recent years there has been a resurgence of conservative notions of middle-class white motherhood and a reinforcement of the social perceptions and expectations stubbornly associated to it (De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017). Three recent books provide vivid examples of this. Recounting her experience as a single African American woman in the US who fights to adopt from the foster care system, in *Motherhood So White* Nefertiti Austin (2019) painfully exposes how American society sees motherhood, and has judged her through a primarily white lens. Austin explains how when

she started the process of adopting a child, all the advice, guidance and resources she found overlooked experiences common to Black mothers and Black mothers-to-be, such as navigating higher-risk pregnancies, caring for the child's natural hair, and explaining and combating systemic racism. Another example is *Mothering While Black*, in which sociologist Dawn Marie Dow (2019) examines the complex lives of African American middle-class mothers and the strategies they use to raise their children to maintain class status while simultaneously defining and protecting their children's "authentically Black" identities. Dow's analysis sheds light on the exclusion of African American middle-class mothers from the dominant cultural experience of middle-class motherhood, dictates against which Black mothers make decisions to ensure the safety, well-being, and future prospects of their children. Echoing similar themes, in *I Am Not Your Baby Mother*, as well as her social media project Make Motherhood Diverse ([www.makemotherhooddiverse.com](http://www.makemotherhooddiverse.com)), Candice Brathwaite (2020) draws on her experience to shine a light on the restricted and controlling images of white, middle-class and able-bodied motherhood that circulate in contemporary British culture and society. Brathwaite's memoir reveals how British Black mothering is profoundly shaped by and interlaced with considerations of race, class and gender: from decisions about naming one's child and where to live, to the very decision of whether to become a parent.

One of the central implications of the above changes in the Anglophone cultural landscape of motherhood is the new visibility granted to maternal labor. The work of social reproduction—bearing and rearing children, caring, cleaning cooking, and the profound affective dimension of mothering—which historically has been delegated to women and stubbornly masked, devalued, and invisibilized (Crittenden, 2010; Federici, 2012; Sandford, 2011), is receiving growing attention and recognition in contemporary Anglophone media. The digital "mamasphere" (Wilson and Chivers-Yochim, 2017) and the expansion of media representations of motherhood contribute to exposing the physical, material, emotional and

aesthetic labors of motherhood and underscore the persistent construction of parenting as women's work.

At the same time, media representations and cultural discourses continue to legitimize the lack of social, political, and economic recognition and reward of maternal labor. Despite significant shifts, mothers' work is still frequently constructed as "natural," a "background condition" (Fraser, 2016), and/or a product of intrinsic maternal love (Douglas and Michaels, 2004). Crucially, the symbolic naturalization and devaluation of mothering work intersects with historical racist discourses and practices which systematically hid and devalued the maternal labor that enslaved women performed in both white slave-owners' homes and their own homes (hooks, 2014; Morrissey and Kimball, 2016; Jones-Rogers, 2019; Roberts, 1994). Stemming from this historical racial system, during the 1980s, under the neoliberal reforms of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, Black mothers' work and contribution to society was aggressively depreciated and devalued (Briggs, 2017; Roberts, 1994). As our analysis will show, the ways in which Black maternal labor is obscured and marginalized in contemporary media are inseparable from this violent history.

### **Meghan Markle: A Liminal Maternal Figure**

It is against this shifting and contradictory terrain that we now turn to explore the construction of Meghan Markle's motherhood and maternal labor in the UK-US media. As we will show, Meghan is frequently positioned at the junction of the contradictory processes and meanings discussed above. On the one hand, as an African-American woman who married into and later chose to exit the British royalty, Meghan by definition, is marked as a *foreign* mother. Self-identifying as a woman and mother of color, she proactively engages with and is ensnared in discourses of US and transatlantic Black motherhood. Highlighting her identity as a feminist, and her commitment to feminism from a young age through her



various engagements in women's empowerment projects (e.g. launching her clothing collection for the charity Smart Works, an organization that helps underprivileged women secure employment; serving as guest editor of the September 2019 special issue of the women's magazine *Vogue*, entitled "Forces for Change"), Meghan has positioned herself squarely as a progressive millennial mother who refuses conservative and traditional notions of maternity and femininity. Yet as Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin (2018) note, while Meghan's public appearances frequently have been interpreted as disrupting the monarchical status quo—through her self-identification as a "proud feminist" and her "rousing celebration of blackness" (Hirsch, 2018)—"traditional monarchical values are explicitly positioned in contradistinction to feminist principles" (Clancy and Yelin, 2018, p. 2). The monarchy, as Raka Shome (2001) notes, is the quintessential establishment of British national patriarchy. Thus, as a member of the British royal family, Meghan was forced to fit into the profoundly narrow confines of gender roles and definitions of white upper-class femininity and motherhood, and to follow in the footsteps of former royal mothers—particularly her mother-in-law Princess Diana and sister-in-law Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, to whom Meghan has been continuously compared and contrasted (see McGill, this volume). Meghan has been situated at the heart of an immensely privileged and conservative institution which she is meant effortlessly and proudly to embody.

As such, Meghan presents an interesting liminal figure. Drawing on Shoshana Felman's (1986, p. 84) *Writing and Madness*, the mediated figure of Meghan can be understood as a "shifter": a sign that is able to move in different and opposing circles and shift their boundaries and meanings depending on the context in which they are represented. In what follows, we explore the ways in which the mediated constructions of Meghan negotiate, trouble, challenge, reassert, and cement the boundaries of contemporary discourse about motherhood and its labors. Given Meghan's national/cultural "in-betweenness," and the

intense attention she has received in both the US and UK media, we examine the mediation of her maternity in UK and US media. We ask: What ideological work does the mediated maternal figure of Meghan perform in this cultural and political moment? What does it open up and how, and what does it obscure, normalize, and reinforce in relation to maternal labor? To address these questions, we first examined the coverage of Meghan Markle in major UK and US newspapers. Using the term “Meghan Markle,” we ran a search of newspaper articles through Nexis, the most comprehensive online news database, from the month before the birth of the royal baby Archie, to the six months after (6 April 2019 to 6 November 2019). From this search we identified three moments that were marked by considerable coverage related to Meghan’s maternity: 1) Prince Harry’s announcement of the birth (May 2019); 2) Meghan’s public outing with the baby (July 2019), her later (September 2019) interview for an ITV documentary, and lawsuit she filed against the British tabloid *Mail on Sunday*; and 3) the royal couple’s South Africa tour (September 2019). We then complemented the newspaper data by searching for additional representations related to these media moments in magazine coverage, on television, websites, and on social media. For this we used the BoB National (Box of Broadcasts) database which includes television programs from the major UK channels (BBC, ITV Channel 4 and Sky News), the Access World News database of US television news, Google News, as well as Twitter and Mumsnet searches. We use each media moment to highlight how it contributes to, reinforces, and/or disrupts contemporary cultural notions and social understandings of motherhood and its labors.

Our analysis inevitably is shaped by the selection of these specific mediated moments, and is by no means an exhaustive picture of the representation of Meghan’s motherhood in the media. However, we argue that given the intense mediation that these moments received, they constitute significant and useful sites which illustrate broader patterns of representation, and resonate with the wider characteristics of and tensions around the depiction of

motherhood and maternal labor in contemporary Anglophone media. We conclude by looking at a fourth media moment, namely “Megxit,” as a way of drawing together the strands of our argument. “Megxit,” which occurred in January 2020, was outside the original timeframe of representations we searched. However, as we explain later, it unfolded as we were writing the article and seemed important and illuminating, so we decided to include it.<sup>5</sup> We highlight Meghan and Harry’s decoupling from the British royal family as a mediated moment which could provide opportunities for rewriting Black motherhood but which at the same time— at least so far—appears to have limited capacity to break away from conservative, white and classed notions of British and American motherhood.

### **Meghan’s Motherhood: Three Mediated Moments**

#### ***1) Harry’s Announcement: Acknowledging Maternal Labor***

On May 6, 2019, surrounded by a herd of photographers stranded outside the royal couple’s new home in Windsor, the ecstatic new father Harry used the public announcement of the birth of the royal baby to express his appreciation of women’s labor, saying: “How any woman does what they do is beyond comprehension.” The Duke of Sussex’s public appreciation for women’s labor reflected the couple’s progressive mindset as manifest throughout Meghan’s pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> Harry’s comment was almost immediately endorsed and commended by social media and the press. For example, on the popular UK parenting website Mumsnet, a thread under the title “Prince Harry's brought another view to giving birth” hosted a lively discussion about men’s insufficient acknowledgement of women’s labor, while on the other side of the Atlantic *Fox News* published an article entitled “Prince Harry applauds Meghan Markle after birth of baby boy” (Savitsky, 2019, May 6).

Harry's widely-praised comment should be read in the wider context of the last decade when numbers of birth stories steadily increased, partly as a rebuttal to the overwhelmingly masculine technocratic culture of medicalized birth (Das, 2017; Kitzinger, 2012). More and more women have shared and discussed their experience of giving birth both online (Das, 2018; 2020) and in books (e.g. *My Birth* by Carmen Winant, *And Now We Have Everything* by Meaghan O'Connell), while television shows such as *One Born Every Minute* (UK),<sup>7</sup> *A Baby Story* (US), and *Parenthood* (US) contribute to making birth more publicly visible. Nevertheless, childbirth remains a largely invisible and even tabooed experience (Cummins, 2019). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram censor images of childbirth, and stories of birth continue notably to be rare in public discourse, being shared mainly in private, and almost exclusively in women-only conversations (De Benedictis, 2016; Weisman, 2018, April 18).

The invisibility of birthing in public discourse has a specific inflection in relation to Black maternal mortality. According to the UK Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths (MBRRACE-UK, 2018), in the UK, the chance of death for Black women going through pregnancy and childbirth is five times higher than white women. In the US, maternal mortality rates are four times higher for Black women compared to white women. Black mothers make up about 40% of women giving birth but constitute over 60% of maternal fatalities. Women of color are 3.2 times more likely than white women to die from pregnancy or childbirth related causes, and six times as likely to suffer from severe maternal morbidity i.e. life threatening conditions related to childbirth and pregnancy complications which may not result in death but do result in life altering health precarity (Petersen et al., 2019). While many face disproportionate poverty, ill health, and lack of access to education and healthcare, the crisis of maternal mortality for Black women crosses class and education lines, as exemplified by the near-death experience of the tennis star Serena Williams's birth of her

first child, and by the fact that US Black women with a college degree die of pregnancy related causes at 5.6 times the rate of white women with a college degree and 1.6 times the rate of white women with less than high school education (Petersen et al., 2019). Toxic physiological stress that is a result of repeated exposure to a climate of racism [what Geronimus (1992) has termed the “weathering” of a mother’s body] and institutional racism in health care play a decisive role in affecting maternal and infant death. Up to 2017, there was no checkbox for maternal mortality on US death certificates, so the national rate of Black maternal death was near impossible to tabulate let alone represent in public discourse. (In January 2020 the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the first standardized maternal mortality data for the 50 states<sup>8</sup>). However, notwithstanding the severity of the Black maternal health crisis in the US and the UK, the topic receives limited attention and often only emerges in the context of celebrity birth experiences such as those of Serena Williams and Beyoncé (Media Matters for America, 2019) or as in Elizabeth Warren’s demand for action in April 2019 in her campaign for the presidential ticket in the US.<sup>9</sup>

Against this cloak of invisibility, Prince Harry’s statement signaled a refreshing, important, and widely supported recognition of maternal labor in public discourse. At the same time, his recognition highlighted Meghan’s and by extension “any woman’s” *individual* labor, while completely occluding the fundamental resources, social environment and support structures needed for the safe and successful performance of this labor. Indeed, the royal couple had insisted on keeping the location of the birth secret, and although it emerged later that Archie had been born at the private Portland Hospital in London, it was never officially announced where Meghan planned to give birth. Yet “any woman,” let alone women of color, with whom Meghan has repeatedly expressed her solidarity, can rarely afford the costs of birthing in a private hospital, and the UK National Health Service (NHS) maternity services

which manage the maternity of the majority of UK women are in crisis. With the looming prospect of what will happen in the aftermath of Brexit, the NHS staffing crisis is deepening and it is reported that midwives are leaving in large numbers due to staffing levels, the poor-quality care they are able to give, and their workloads. It is in this radically different context that “any woman” in the UK normally will give birth. What is more, as a Black woman giving birth in the UK, Meghan’s chances of dying from pregnancy and birth complications were five times higher than those of a white woman, her economic and celebrity status notwithstanding. Thus, although Harry’s statement was seen as a progressive, inclusive, feminist acknowledgement of the labor of *all* women, it masks both the immense privilege that secured his wife’s safe and successful labor *and* the significantly higher risk of her labor as a woman of color, which, as we discussed, persists even for the Black women with the most advantages.

Furthermore, Harry’s recognition problematically was limited to and centered the physical aspect of biological mothering and maternal labor. It draws on and in turn reinforces a reductive conception of mothering and the bodies that can perform it. This (un-  
intersectional) view and its popular endorsement, fundamentally undercut Black feminism’s expansive definitions and practices of mothering and maternal labor which radically decenter biology (Hill-Collins, 2020; Knott, 2019; Nash, 2019), and which crucially, are part of Meghan’s own history. According to media reports and Meghan’s biography, her maternal grandmother Jeanette Ragland, played an active part in her mothering to support her daughter, Meghan’s biological mother Doria, in the pursuit of the latter’s career (Berg Olsen, 2019, April 13; Sheridan, 2017, December 2).

## ***2) Meghan’s Public Outing with the Baby and the ITV Documentary: Scrutinizing Mothers***

Following baby Archie's christening at Windsor Castle (July 6, 2019), on July 10, 2019 Meghan arrived at a polo match carrying her son. Photos of Meghan cradling the baby quickly went viral; she was shamed for holding the baby in the “wrong” way, as if she was about to drop him. “If Meghan Markle was someone’s nanny, caring for an infant the way she did Archie at Polo,” one post read, “she’d be fired on the spot. I wouldn’t let her look after my goldfish.”<sup>10</sup> “Can someone please show Meghan how to hold a baby?” read another post.<sup>11</sup> British and American newspapers and websites were quick to report on the social media mother-shaming to which Meghan had been subjected, accompanying the reports with the “incriminating” photos (Carlin, 2019, July 11; Forsey, 2019, July 11; Morgan, 2019, August 15; Napoli, 2019, July 11).

The cruel social media responses and their repetition in the media are typical of mother-blaming and harsh judgments of mothers’ parenting practices which as research has documented, have alarmingly become a common phenomenon (Orgad, 2019; Cain, 2016; Das, 2020; Jensen, 2018; Lee et al., 2014; Thomson et al., 2011; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017). Yet it was hard to miss the particularly racial and racist undertones to these messages: that Black women are irresponsible mothers who do not know how to parent their children. As Dorothy Roberts (1994, p. 874) observes, “[D]ominant images have long depicted Black mothers as unfit...whites portrayed Black slave mothers as careless and unable to care properly for their *own* children.” Such insinuations of Meghan’s maternal inadequacy remind us how central the “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) remains for women of color. As Higginbotham (1993) explains, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as African American women sought to counter and overcome debilitating stereotypes of their personhood as inept and unkempt, focus on cleanliness, sexual propriety, polite manners, and social decorum aimed both to demonstrate to white audience that African Americans were worthy of respect and was used as a measure for self-surveillance and social uplift, to

encourage African Americans to be respectable. Respectability came to serve a gatekeeping function in which the “right” to respect had clear associations with behavioral decorum. Although Black feminists have since challenged the boundaries of what constitutes respectability, reclaiming and rebranding some of the negative terms associated with Black behavior (Pickens 2014), the media dragging of Meghan as an unfit mother based on her allegedly indecorous maternal behavior is a reminder of respectability’s deep-seated function of racial policing. Equally insidious is the direct comparison of Meghan to a nanny which positions her simultaneously as subservient racialized other (the mammy) and (im)proper white mother, echoing the experience of many Black mothers being mistaken for the nanny. Against this construction, the white mother is cast as having the natural instincts which make her the perfect, responsible mother who knows how to care for her children and who knows also how to hire a proper nanny (it is telling that Kate Middleton has rarely been censured for her childcare).<sup>12</sup>

Meghan has continued to be the subject of intense media spotlight, scrutinized repeatedly for her mothering and wifedom practices, her appearance and clothing choices, and her other activities. Three months after those events, in an ITV documentary about the royal couple’s Africa tour which was released in October 2019, Meghan spoke candidly about the impact of this media scrutiny on her mental health as a new mother. “Any woman, especially when they’re pregnant, you’re really vulnerable, and so that was made really challenging. And then when you have a newborn, you know. And especially as a woman, it’s a lot,” she told ITV anchor Tom Bradby. “So you add this on top of just trying to be a new mom or trying to be a newlywed...Not many people have asked if I’m ok ... it’s a very real thing to be going through behind the scenes.” In a similar fashion to Harry’s statement which positioned Meghan on a par with “any woman,” Meghan’s emotional confession evokes her similarity to and identification with “any woman.” Invoking motherhood as a universalizing



and equalizing link, Meghan in this interview highlights maternal vulnerability, and the mental and emotional price of mother-scrutiny and policing. Importantly, her confession centers the affective dimension of maternal labor: that crucial, yet invisible (“behind the scenes,” as she puts it) aspect of a mother’s work. Meghan’s confessions notably resonated strongly with other mothers who praised her on social media and in media reports for her candidness and bravery (Peters, 2019; October 21). “Meghan Markle is \*all\* new moms when she says, ‘Not many people have asked if I’m okay’,”<sup>13</sup> declared the maternal website *Motherly*, echoing the universal position that Black maternal celebrities such as Beyoncé and Serena Williams have come to inhabit (Nash, 2019).

At the same time, in centering the affective, Meghan’s response relegates maternal labor to the realm of emotions and psychology. Her media confession is vague about what causes mothers to be vulnerable, says nothing about the huge work mothering entails, and leaves the connection between maternal labor, inequality, and maternal vulnerability entirely unaddressed. Unlike celebrities Serena Williams and Beyoncé who, as Nash (2019) argues, through their mediated maternal appearances and aesthetics have systematically connected “personal and political discontent” (Brooks, cited in Nash, 2019, p. 566), Meghan’s confession (and arguably, also the secrecy surrounding her birthing) fails to make this link. It fails to connect her personal frustrations and emotions to a political critique of maternal labor and gender inequality. Specifically, how the subjective, individual feelings she experiences are inseparable from the structural delegation of parenting—especially in the first months after the birth—almost exclusively to women. Harry, who has been consistently depicted as the egalitarian, feminist partner,<sup>14</sup> is conspicuously absent from the taxing emotional toll of that Meghan describes as a new parent and a newlywed.

“I never thought that this would be easy” Meghan added in the documentary interview about being subjected to media scrutiny, “but I thought it would be fair and that’s the part

that's really hard to reconcile...I've said for a long time to H – that's what I call him – it is not enough to just survive something. That's not the point of life. You've got to thrive and feel happy.” On the one hand, Meghan’s ITV confession of her vulnerability and unhappiness (which has been seen as a watershed moment leading to the royal couple’s later exit from their royal duties, as we discuss later) can be read as a refusal to go along with public displays of maternal happiness, allowing her desire to trouble the fantasy of happiness. Here, Meghan embodies Sara Ahmed’s (2010) “killjoy.” On the other hand, in this killjoy confession, Meghan reconnects her desire to the individualistic fantasy of happiness and of “thriving,” foreclosing on the very opening she created. “There is a political struggle,” writes Ahmed (2010, p. 69) “about how we attribute good and bad feelings,” and it is a struggle which, as feminist critics have underscored, is profoundly racialized. The ITV interview thus constitutes a complex moment in which Meghan refuses her maternal body to “go along with” the fantasy but at the same time, in a cruelly optimistic fashion (Berlant, 2011), re-attaches herself to the very fantasy she refuses.

Shortly after the ITV documentary was released, Meghan took the unusual decision to sue the *Mail on Sunday* after the newspaper published a handwritten letter she had sent to her estranged father. The decision came as Harry launched an extraordinary and highly personal attack on the British tabloid press and its treatment of his wife, saying he could no longer be a “silent witness to her private suffering” (Waterson and Davies, 2019, October 2). Much can and has been said about whether this decision was justified and important, especially in light of Harry’s traumatic experience of his mother’s treatment by the tabloid press. However, the decision to file this lawsuit fundamentally redirected the focus from the mother-shaming and mother-scrutiny (which arguably, relate to “any” mother) to the issue of celebrity media scrutiny. It reframed Meghan’s universal position and experience from one shared by “any mother” and especially Black mothers, to one exclusive to the highly privileged club to which

Meghan belongs. Indeed, it overlooks the many mothers for whom the goal *is* to survive, which clearly, for Meghan, is “not enough.”

### ***3) The Royal Couple’s South Africa Tour: Racializing the Maternal***

The ITV documentary which included the interview with Meghan documented the royal couple’s tour of Africa which started in South Africa. After watching a self-defense class for girls, organized by the human rights organization Justice Desk initiative in Cape Town's Nyanga township, Meghan gave a brief speech to the young people there. She spoke about the importance of preventing gender-based violence through education, and praised her audience for standing firm with their “core values of respect, dignity, and equality.” Quoting the civil rights activist and poet Maya Angelou who said that “each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it, possibly without claiming it, she stands up for all women,” Meghan concluded her brief speech with a personal observation:

And just on one personal note, may I just say that while I am here with my husband as a member of the Royal family, I want you to know that I am here as a mother, as a wife, as a woman, as a woman of color, and as your sister. I am here with you and I am here for you and thank you for showing us your Ubuntu [spirit of togetherness].<sup>15</sup>

Meghan’s speech and her personal comment in particular, quickly went viral. It was overwhelmingly applauded on social media and media outlets, described as “powerful,” “feminist,” and “empowering” (Bailey, 2019, September 23; Bateman, 2019, September 24; Mackelden, 2019, September 23; Nicholl, 2019, September 24). Many commended Meghan’s words for resonating and inspiring women around the world, and for her strong message of universal sisterhood. Indeed, Meghan did not just speak about sisterhood; she performed it: she danced with local women in Cape Town, hugged many of them and their children, and joined in food preparations in a community cooking activity.

Importantly, Meghan's speech in Nyanga was the first time she invoked her racial identity since joining the royal family.<sup>16</sup> Her marginalization of her role as a member of the royal family and her foregrounding of her multiple feminine roles and racial identity seemingly erase the fundamental asymmetric power relations between her and her South African "sisters". The intimacy constructed through her identification as a woman of color who is "here with you" and "for you" obfuscates the crucial historical role of the British monarchy and Empire in the colonial project. Meghan invokes motherhood as a universalizing link for global feminist solidarity, and identifies as a woman of color to highlight her racialized identity. Yet her speech neatly operates in and in turn reinforces a post-racial façade where race is dissociated from its historical and material context to promote a fantasy of egalitarianism, and here, maternal solidarity and sisterhood (Orgad & Gill, forthcoming). To cite Raka Shome (2011, p. 390), Meghan appears as the figure of the "global mother" (a role performed only some decades earlier by her deceased mother-in-law Princess Diana) whose politics is "predicated upon a transnational love that offers the promise of a history and color-blind cosmopolitanism."

Thus, while Meghan deliberately claimed her racialized identity in the presence of her African "sisters," her participation and performance in this space seem largely to have drawn on and in turn reinforced celebration of the discourse of "global motherhood"—a discourse intimately related to the histories of global colonialism, and "powerfully imbricated in the ideologies and forces of white patriarchal heterosexual nationalism" (Shome, 2011, p. 390).

Crucially, Meghan's post-birth appearances in the media juxtapose with the profound racialized histories of laboring women and injustice, including those embodied by her own mother, African American single mother Doria Ragland. While it is futile to speculate about Ragland's personal approach to mothering, it is critical to note that her representation as a Black American mother on the global stage intersects with both the increased visibility of

motherhood in general, and the obfuscation of the historical and present realities of Black maternal labor, disenfranchisement, and state violence. Described by Meghan as a “free spirit,” Doria captured media attention as a single mom who left her daughter in the care of her mother Jeanette Ragland, so that she could develop her small business. Later a yoga teacher and a social worker, according to *The New Yorker*, Doria established an “us against the world” ethos in her relationship with Meghan whom she continues to call “Flower” (St. Félix, 2018, May 21). In addition to the countercultural flower-child evocations insinuated by these descriptions (reinforced by the attention to Doria’s nose ring),<sup>17</sup> a deeper history of Black mothering is summoned up by the depiction of Doria as a kind of defiant earth mother.

The emphasis on Doria as a single Black mother who placed her daughter in the care of her own mother evokes the notion of Black maternal labor as centered around the primacy of home and radical home-making (Gumbs et al., 2016). In this framework, Black motherhood is fundamentally community-centered, non-biological, and a practice of solidarity which echoes bell hooks’ idea of “‘homeplace,’ the space—literal, material, psychic, spiritual—that Black mothers produce as refuges from the anti-Black violence of daily life” (hooks cited in Nash, 2019, p. 558). For hooks and others, the very fact of Black mothering is countercultural; it is anti-state care *work* which does not layer over the labor often associated with the mundane, quotidian task of caregiving.

Thus, compared with Meghan’s performance of the role of the “global mother,” Doria’s maternal figure represents not only a free spirited but downright radical mother, embracing not only her child Flower but also the maternal labor of her own mother, Jeanette. Furthermore, the media’s focus on Doria’s fashion choices and personal aesthetics such as her nose ring and dreadlocks,<sup>18</sup> implicitly highlights her defiance of traditional Anglophone “respectability.” At the same time, this focus deflects from the aspects of Black motherhood that most need tending, the forms of work which accompany mothering, the exhausting labor

that “any mother” performs which remains largely under-compensated, masked, and unsupported.

The royal couple’s Africa tour highlighted a further significant aspect of Meghan’s mothering which has been systematically obfuscated: the royal baby’s nanny. Typical of celebrities’ and politicians’ hiding of their childcare arrangements (see Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Cobb, 2008; Jermyn, 2012; Onion, 2019) and of the broader invisibility of social reproduction in popular representations, from the outset the royal couple were extremely secretive about their childcare choices. While pregnant, saying she was “fiercely proud of her American roots” (Vogue, 2019, April 19), Meghan reportedly expressed her preference to hire an American rather than a British nanny from the agency which historically has supplied the royal nannies. After the birth, it was reported (but never officially confirmed) that the royal couple had fired their first nanny for being “unprofessional,” and employed the second one only to cover the nights (Andrews, 2019, August 20). At the start of their Africa tour, photos of the couple disembarking from the plane revealed the nanny, a Black woman following Meghan, who was seen carrying four-month-old Archie (this was the second sighting of the nanny whose name has not been revealed, the first being when she joined the royals during their trip to the south of France).<sup>19</sup>

There may be good reasons for the almost complete absence of the nanny from media representations of Meghan’s maternity. Yet the absencing of this nanny who significantly is a nameless Black woman, operates to sustain the fiction of the “good mother” who does it all on her own. Fundamentally, the nanny’s absence hides the crucial role and work of othermothering and the shared responsibility of caring for and raising children. While othermothering can be traced to slavery as a mechanism for collective survival within enslaved communities (the shared mothering of enslaved children), othermothering can be understood also as shadow mothering or the labor of mothering of children unrelated

biologically or legally to oneself. Such relationships have a long and entrenched history stemming in the US from enslaved domestic servitude. In 1870 in the US South, more than 40% of married Black women had jobs, many as field laborers and caretakers, while over 98% of white wives were homemakers. By 1920, Black women comprised 82% of female servants in the US (Fox Genovese, 1988). This fact of colored female servitude on behalf of white women has been noted by voices as distinct as Audre Lorde and Caitlin Flanagan. Yet the absence of this abject group of female careworkers from popular discussions of mothering persists. As Kimberley Seals Allers (2018, March 5) wrote recently in *Slate*, “Black women in [the US] are viewed as perfectly acceptable and desirable for taking care of other people’s children but somehow stereotyped as not being able to take care of their own” (see also Roberts, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

As we were completing this article Prince Harry and Meghan Markle announced their dramatic decision to remove themselves from full-time royal duties and take up partial residence in North America. “Megxit,” as this decision has come to be known, has been framed, at least in part, as driven by Meghan’s struggles as a new mother and triggered polarized views. Those who support the move, cite Meghan’s vulnerability as evidence of the difficulties involved in being a new mom; those critical of the move see it as yet more evidence of her bad motherhood—she cannot handle the task. For example, Meghan was accused by some of being a bad mother for leaving Archie in Canada to fly to London (Donato, 2020, January 13), while concurrently receiving supportive messages from mothers who identified with her struggle and criticized the mom-shaming to which she was being subjected (Hine, 2020, January 22). This binary is consistent with and in turn reinforces the intensely judgmental cultural climate surrounding mothers and Black mothers in particular,

which we have discussed and demonstrated in this article. Indeed, Megxit has become an intense site of the regulation of motherhood.

Media reports about Megxit have centered the maternal in another significant way: Meghan's mom, Doria. Doria has been described as the "silent but steely" (Griffith, 2020, January 26) force behind Megxit; the couple's decision to withdraw from their royal duties and seek financial independence as the product of the messages which the single mother instilled in her daughter about the importance of being financially independent and realizing her full potential. Consistent with previous constructions of Doria as the epitome of "grace," "elegance," "restraint," "dignity," and "poise," which, as Fiona Handyside (this issue) argues highlight her as a body under control, the descriptions of Doria as "silent but steely" work to celebrate and simultaneously to vilify her Black maternity. On the one hand, in contrast to both Meghan's father and Harry's absent mother, Doria is depicted as the composed, steady "rock" maternal figure—echoing the popular trope of the steely, resolute, non-nonsense Black mother and tapping into a stereotype of the Black maternal as quietly long-suffering. On the other hand, the image of the silent and steely mother has a strong but tacit racialized dimension: she operates stealthily behind the scenes, not attracting attention but having a detrimental effect—here, in the form of influencing her daughter and son-in-law to decouple from the institution that epitomizes Britishness, whiteness, and power.

Media reports have also highlighted the maternal role Doria has played for Harry: "she has become a rock to Harry" (Griffith, 2020, January 26), a friend cited in *The Sun* said, "Harry in particular turns to her for advice" (Graham, 2020, January 26), a confidante in the *Daily Mail* observed.<sup>20</sup> The "specter" in these accounts, is of course, Harry's late mother Diana who it is implied, Doria replaces. Thus, Doria is squarely positioned in the shadows of the saintly mother, whose image as Raka Shome argues, idolizes white motherhood against "pathological" and "dysfunctional" Black motherhood. As Black feminists have argued



repeatedly, Black mothers continue to be judged and harnessed by the cultural ideals of white motherhood. At the same time, juxtaposed as she is both implicitly and explicitly to Diana, Doria's representation as the "main mom" inverts the "controlling image" of the Black mammy who fades into the background so that proper white maternity can take the spotlight (Hill-Collins 1998). Rather, Doria may open up a space for a different kind of public maternity, one that crosses the lines of race, gender, biology, and class and one with which there may be a profound discomfort, particularly in Britain. As Afua Hirsch (2020, January 9) observes, "in Britain's rigid class society, there is still a deep correlation between privilege and race," and motherhood, we would add, is a central context where this correlation is manifest.

Implied in reports about the decisive role Doria played in Megxit is also the couple's move as an attempt to be closer to Doria Ragland, perhaps connecting to a lineage of Black American women who keep their mothers close when they have children to raise (Michelle Obama's mother famously moved into the Whitehouse with the Obamas in 2008). As we were writing this paper, some reports announced that Doria plans to move to Canada to live with or close to her daughter and Harry.<sup>21</sup> Framed this way, Meghan claims an African American familial heritage, a kinship structure that is community-oriented and values the role of the maternal grandmother. The implied importance of Doria's involvement in raising Archie foregrounds an expansive meaning of maternal labor, which is rooted in the history of Black mothering, and challenges (if implicitly) biological and individualistic conceptualizations of mothering. In similar fashion to Beyoncé's foregrounding of her own mother in her mediated performance (Nash, 2019), and to Serena Williams's "Letter to my mom" which she published after the birth of her first child (Orgad & Gill, forthcoming), the centering of Doria can be read as what Nash (2019, p. 567) describes as "a call to 'remember' our mothers, their corporeal sacrifice and generosity, their life-giving power." (The centering

of Doria recalls the centering of Doria's mother Jeanette, who lived around the corner from Doria and Meghan.) And this call, Nash (2019) argues, expands Black maternity in a moment when Black motherhood (in the US) is imagined as a space of crisis and continually sutured to grief, death, and mourning.

Thus, the mediation of Megxit has been a site where the fraught meanings of motherhood, and of Black maternity and maternal labor in particular, are exposed, negotiated, contested, regulated, and reinforced. Alongside the increasing expansion, destabilizing, and reframing of the meanings of motherhood in contemporary culture especially by voices of celebrity Black mothers, Meghan's mediated appearance may open up a space for rewriting Black motherhood. Yet whether or not the work of "rewriting" Black motherhood proves possible within the celebrity sphere which Meghan has occupied continuously since she entered Hollywood, remains a question. Within the royal sphere it has proven highly challenging if not impossible: Despite the promise that Meghan and Prince Harry will "rewrite the royal rulebook" (McGoogan 2018, cited in Clancy and Yelin, 2018), Megxit can be seen as an admission that the royal rulebook is less amenable to change than they perhaps anticipated.

At the same time, the absence of Diana and the presence of Doria coming into sharp relief, might mean that representations of Meghan's maternity might start to break away from conservative, white, and classed notions of British and American motherhood. Rather than blending the Commonwealth histories of colonial domination into her motherhood like the flowers of former colonies sewn onto her wedding veil, Meghan's mediated maternity may contribute to highlighting as much as hiding the long and vexed history of trans-Atlantic racial desire and exchange. Until then, to paraphrase Harry's comment, how any woman does the unequal labor of mothering, remains largely occluded, and indeed beyond comprehension, in the mediated representation of Meghan Markle's maternity.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2013/07/23/royal-baby-private-eye-front-page-sums-mood-nation>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.mother.ly/st/year-of-the-mother>; <https://www.acesconnection.com/blog/2020-is-the-year-of-the-mother>

<sup>3</sup> See Nash (2019) in which she argues that the mediated maternal figures and related aesthetics of Serena Williams and Beyoncé have taken up a universal position that melds their political and personal discontent.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the poet Camille Dungy (2017) describes overpacking for her infant daughter on one of their trips to Maine as an antidote to the unknown scenarios based on the potentially fickle weather.

<sup>5</sup> To identify representations of “Megxit” we searched the same databases used for the previous three moments.

<sup>6</sup> For example, referring to the Queen’s doctors, Meghan said she didn’t want “the men in suits” to supervise the birth, and appointed her own delivery team, led by a female obstetrician (Hockaday, 2019, April 7).

<sup>7</sup> On the cultural meanings and reception of *One Born Every Minute*, see De Benedictis (2016) and Horeck (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/womens-health/u-s-finally-has-better-maternal-mortality-data-black-mothers-n1125896>

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.essence.com/feature/sen-elizabeth-warren-black-women-mortality-essence/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.elitedaily.com/p/the-photos-of-meghan-holding-baby-archie-at-harrys-polo-match-have-mommy-shamers-riled-up-18192245>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/meghan-markle-shamed-holding-archie>

<sup>12</sup> See Duncan and Bidman (2020, January 18).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mother.ly/news/meghan-markle-on-being-a-new-mom>

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Betancourt (2020, September 26).

<sup>15</sup> Bailey (2019, September 23).

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/9988492/meghan-markle-race-royal-south-african-teens-im-here-as-a-woman-of-colour-and-as-your-sister/>

<sup>17</sup> See for example: <https://www.popsugar.com/fashion/Doria-Ragland-Nose-Ring-Royal-Wedding-2018-44862180>; <https://www.insider.com/meghan-markle-mom-doria-ragland-nose-ring-royal-wedding-2018-5>; and <https://www.essence.com/hair/royal-wedding-meghan-markle-mom-doria-ragland-locs-nose-ring/>

<sup>18</sup> See for example <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/tradition/a16405569/meghan-markle-mother-doria-ragland/> and <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/royals/meghan-markles-mom-kept-her-nose-ring-for-the-royal-wedding---and-people-are-obsessed/ar-AAxvhEe>

<sup>19</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2019/09/24/rare-glimpse-harry-meghans-nanny-royal-tour-south-africa-10801457/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-7929587/Doria-Ragland-played-vital-role-Megxit-say-friends.html>; <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/10822139/meghan-markle-mum-doria-rock-prince-harry-queen/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-au/lifestyle/lifestyleroys/doria-raglands-plans-to-move-to-canada-with-her-daughter-and-prince-harry/ar-BBZJNMN>