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‘I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros’: Black majesty and the fault-lines of colonialism

On 29 October 2019, a cross-party group of female MPs led by the Labour Party’s Holly Lynch (2019) sent a letter addressed to HRH the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, ‘express[ing] solidarity’ with the princess in ‘taking a stand against the often distasteful and misleading nature of the stories printed in a number of our national newspapers’. The letter gestured to the feud that had been fomenting between the Sussexes and the U.K. newspaper press over negative media representations of Markle since her inception into the Royal Family, and proceeded to condemn the ‘outdated, colonial undertones to some of these stories’. From the flagrant bigotry of Twitter trolls to the more subtle and coded articulations of racism that have found their expression in media references to Meghan Markle’s ‘exotic DNA’ and her Crenshaw District origins in South Los Angeles (Garcia-Navarro and Foster 2019), there is no doubt that racialised language has been used to strategic rhetorical effect in service of a historic and prevailing heritage of white supremacy. This discomfiting heritage suffuses Britain’s biggest cultural institutions: the Bank of England, the British Museum, West India Dock and indeed the British monarchy, which has been at the helm of an imperial programme hinging on the conquest, acquisition and accumulation of resources, land and bodies that goes back, at the very least, to the early modern period (Taylor 2016, p. 29; Olusoga 2016, p. 51). Despite growing efforts to combat and counteract this national legacy through new and more inclusive de-colonial narratives that recognise the subaltern struggles of marginalised and typically occluded communities of colour across the African diaspora, colonialist mentalities continue to be cultivated, trivialised and normalised within the British cultural mainstream. This fact was made abundantly clear in the media response to the toppling of the statue of the notorious eighteenth-century slaver Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020 following action by Black-led protest groups and subsequent discussions around the re-siting and dismantlement of other contested historical monuments associated with the slave trade which were almost universally branded as acts of ‘historical erasure’ by mainstream conservative commentators (Vine 2020; O’Neill 2020). Bigotry has been amplified and indeed given official sanction by political rhetoric around Brexit and increasingly discriminatory hostile environment policies cultivated by the U.K. Home Office. It is hardly surprising, in light of the proliferation of these attitudes, that gestures of allyship are often viewed with scepticism. Indeed, journalist Paula Akpan (2019) ironically rebutted Lynch’s letter, stating that “‘Colonial undertones” is a v[ery] novel way of making racism

sound like a cabernet sauvignon’, suggesting that such expressions of solidarity do not nearly go far enough in attempting to disassemble the prevailing racist and colonialist frameworks that underpin and uphold ideas of Britishness.

Signposting colonialist language is nevertheless vital to recognising the specific historicity of the racist assaults levelled against Meghan Markle in the (white, colonialist) British cultural imaginary. Perhaps more importantly, it offers a framework for thinking through symbolic and cultural forms of potentially radical, Black-led and female-centric *anticolonial* resistance with which Meghan Markle is figuratively intertwined and historically connected. Because ultimately, as a Black princess, Meghan Markle represents something that is absolutely anathema to the colonialist imagination. Like Marie-Louise Christophe, who became Queen of the Kingdom of Hayti—a nation forged from the fires of the most successful slave revolt in history—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 majesty.¹ As such, she presents a radical proposition that confounds any easy deconstruction of the conservative, hegemonic and undeniably imperialist underpinnings of monarchy, and lends itself to a popular and continually growing cultural discourse that harnesses reginal tropes to articulate a radical, pro-Black and woman-centric vision of the past, present and future.

Drawing on African Atlantic, Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship and harnessing interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural history, cultural and media studies, anthropology and heritage studies, this article interrogates the politics and aesthetics of Black majesty that Meghan Markle and other cultural interlocutors such as Beyoncé Knowles-Carter both inform and embody. At the same time, it probes the cultural-historical significance of Black queenship and its relationship to a tradition of anticolonial resistance from the Age of Revolution to the present, looking closely at Meghan Markle in parallel with Marie-Louise Christophe, first Queen of Haiti. It nevertheless subjects to scrutiny and problematises the proposition that any iteration or interpretation of majesty in the Black cultural imaginary can truly be considered radical or revolutionary when monarchy as a construct hinges on structures of inequality and the cultural tropes derived thereof so often affirm a cultural investment in values associated with capitalist meritocracy what Paul Gilroy

¹ I use both ‘Kingdom of Hayti’ and ‘Haiti’ interchangeably in this essay to differentiate between the official name accorded by Christophe to the northern island province over which he ruled between 1811-1820, and the region incorporating this territory that has borne witness to numerous regime and geographical boundary-changes since 1804 but has always been identified as ‘Haiti’.

(2019) has termed ‘bootstraps neoliberalism’. It also considers whether this model of Black majesty presents a robust challenge to the ‘interlocking systems’ of oppression that bell hooks (2009, p. 4) has constituted as ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’.² Fundamentally, although the concept of majesty may seem to jar incongruously with notions of radicalism—especially given the predominantly socialist and universalist aims of the radical Black protest movement throughout history—it demonstrates how Black majestic figures, both real and imagined, have contributed to moments and movements of rupture and exposed colonial fault-lines.

Black Bourbons: Radical Reformulations of Imperialist Queenship in the Black Atlantic

The Atlantic World was irrevocably transformed by the phenomenon of republican revolution in the late eighteenth century, which in turn gave rise to nascent conceptions of the modern nation state, galvanised activist sensibilities on issues of social justice and civil liberty and paved a course for the dismantlement of monarchist autocracies. Despite these radical shifts, systems of dominance characterised by colonialism (as a system of settlement and expropriation), imperialism (as a system of conquest and expansion) and global capitalism (as an economic system upheld by both of these governing precepts) continued to underpin what anthropologist and cultural historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has described as a ‘global geography of imagination’. These phenomena remain universal truths across ‘Western’, or, as Trouillot has more accurately characterised as, ‘North Atlantic’ societies, economies and geographies. Within this North Atlantic cultural framework, self-determination and independent statehood across the Black diaspora represents a symbolic point of departure that radically contests these universal principles, occupying a ‘savage slot’ that uncannily illuminates a reality of global transformations, negotiations and, above all, insurgencies at the fault-lines of colonialism (Trouillot 2003, pp. 1-2). The phenomenon of Black majesty nevertheless occupies more uncertain terrain that is simultaneously both radical in a representational and figurative sense *and* conservative in praxis. While Black majestic figures operate within monarchical systems of dominance which uphold the articulating principles of colonialism, imperialism and global capitalism, for example, the intersection of monarchy and Black diasporic histories of anticolonial resistance represents a symbolic anomaly which both lays bare and confronts the inherent contradictions of those principles. Real manifestations of Black majesty in modern Atlantic World history, from Marie-Louise

² Though hooks uses this phrase specifically in relation to the United States, it can be applied more generally to the western, or, rather, North Atlantic cultural imaginary.

Christophe to Meghan Markle help to crystallise this view.

When Henry and Marie-Louise Christophe entered the public arena as King and Queen of the Kingdom of Hayti in 1811, they stunned and perplexed contemporary commentators across the Atlantic world. Born of an anticolonial revolution led by enslaved and free-coloured insurgents in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, Haiti began life in January 1804 as an independent Black republic, that, over the course of subsequent decades, underwent several radical reincarnations. Shortly after declaring its independence, it swiftly became an imperial state under the jurisdiction of the self-proclaimed Black Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines that split, following his assassination, into two separate states led by rival revolutionary factions: the northern État (State)—and later Royaume (Kingdom)—d’Hayti, governed by the former revolutionary General Henry Christophe, and the southern République d’Hayti. As a result, Haiti—as a cultural monolith within the colonialist imaginary that aggregated these structural and geographical complexities—became a convenient metaphor in North Atlantic colonial print culture for Black retribution and Black misrule. Despite his professed Anglophilia, Christophe’s northern kingdom was by no means exempted from such unfavourable representation, and Temi Odumosu (2017) notes that ‘English satirists exploited in varying degrees’ stereotypical representations of Haitian degeneracy, excess and violence during Christophe’s reign. Indeed, though racist caricatures supported by animalistic imagery were pervasive in nineteenth-century Atlantic print culture, the Atlantic presses also strove to create a narrative that rendered aberrant and delegitimised the presence of the nascent kingdom on the world stage. They offered up voyeuristic accounts of the ceremonial regalia, clothing, furniture and other luxury goods commissioned for the Haitian crown, details of which were reproduced with rapturous excitement and exoticism. An 1817 notice in the London *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, for example, listed details of ‘large purchases [...] made in Bremen, and other Hanseatic cities, for the Queen of Hayti, of services for the table, brilliants, pearls, &c.’ which were ‘paid for in ready money, at high prices’ (p. 2). That a Black woman in the age of slavery had such significant purchasing power presented an almost universal conundrum. Indeed, if, as Trouillot (1995) has suggested, the Haitian Revolution was ‘unthinkable’ in the white western imaginary, then the fact of what came after—of independent Black statehood and a fully-fledged Black monarchy with a transnational geopolitical reach—was doubly unthinkable. The subtext of this notice, and its allusion to the Christophes’ ‘ready money’ is thus one of illegitimacy; gesturing to the queen’s newly-acquired ‘bourgeois’ status, it encodes a subliminal message that Marie-Louise’s queenship is neither inherited nor divinely sanctioned. This encoded suggestion of

illegitimacy is rendered all the more compelling in the diplomatic context given that, at this point in history, neither the northern Kingdom nor the southern State of Hayti had been recognised as sovereign nations by any of the leading Atlantic world powers (not least France). The perverse attention to detail also replicates the structures of colonialist decontextualisation manifest in the first ‘cabinets of curiosities’ that emerged in Europe during the age of sail and indeed prevailed in the structured and taxonomical frameworks that took hold after the advent of the modern museum in the eighteenth century.

Similar titillating narratives of unbridled excess and illegitimacy emerged in the wake of Meghan Markle’s baby shower prior to the birth of her child, Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor. Honing in on Markle’s network of wealthy celebrity friends (the event was co-hosted by Serena Williams and Amal Clooney), her alleged impropriety in attending the unsanctioned party, and the long list of expenses incurred on the trip, media accounts converged to reinforce a hyperbolic fantasy in which Meghan Markle was cast as the ‘Bougiest Woman on Earth’ (Tindall 2019). Though written over two hundred years apart, these exaggerated and exoticised accounts betray the same subtext of fear in the North Atlantic imaginary: a fear of the assertive visibility, power and economic autonomy of Black women, and in the subversive threat that their existence might pose to the colonial world order whose very systems of dominance were historically intertwined with the subordination of Black female bodies.³

As Haitian Studies scholar Doris Garraway (2012, p. 9) has highlighted, however, the Christophes ‘relied on the presumed prestige of royalism to foster recognition abroad and to redeem Haitians [...] from the infamy of slavery.’ Certainly the British naturalist and explorer Joseph Banks believed that the Christophes were cultivating the right sort of royal image, lauding Henry Christophe’s ‘Code Henry’ as ‘the most moral association of men in existence’ (qtd. in Daut 2019). Acts of conspicuous consumption were thus, in part, revelatory of a concerted effort to *reinforce* the Christophes’ royal legitimacy. Attempts to model a regal self-image following the imperialist European example were manifest in the construction of a grand royal palace (Sans Souci) and imposing mountaintop fortress visible from the harbour of the kingdom’s capital, Cap Haïtien (Citadelle Laferrière); in the ceremonial culture that the Christophes strove to foster in and around the royal court; and in

³ Across the majority of the slaveholding Atlantic world from at least the seventeenth century, legal doctrine around conditions of enslavement followed the system of *partus sequitur ventrem*, meaning that the legal status of the child was determined by the condition of the mother. This matrilineal system of enslavement was ruthlessly manipulated by slaveholders, who exploited the reproductive capabilities of enslaved women to replenish their ‘stock’ of enslaved chattel.

the attendant stories that such phenomena inevitably generated. These stories were at the locus of a royally sanctioned spin campaign authored by the royal advisor, Pompée Valentin (otherwise known as the Baron de Vastey), who, in 1816, wrote a 76-page account of the Queen's birthday, which was celebrated over the course of twelve days and concluded with a twelve-cannon salute. Marie-Louise was toasted as the 'august queen of the Haitians' and the 'perfect model of wives and mothers'. Every minute detail from the magnificence of the carriages of each member of the royal court, and the number of horses that preceded them, to the balls, fireworks, costumes, feasts, parades and speeches that the days-long fête comprised were likewise recorded in Vastey's 'Relation' (1816, pp. 1-11). Though mediated, co-opted and otherwise occluded in the Atlantic press, Marie-Louise strove to reassert and reclaim her voice, working hard to construct her own majestic self-image against the grain of a hostile colonialist North Atlantic world.

Material fragments of her interesting life give us compelling and nuanced insights into the pride that she invested in the role of royal consort and the resilience that she demonstrated in the face of adversity. Among the surviving material transcripts from the court of Christophe is a cotton chemise gown which belonged to a member of Marie-Louise's royal entourage who was also her purported god-daughter, Dame Eléonore Cheruxi de Laroche Asnière (figure 1). This artefact, recently restored in Paris on the commission of the Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien, Haiti's leading national museum, offers a myriad of interpretative possibilities concerning the tastes, aspirations and realms of influence of the Haitian crown, and the vision of majesty cultivated by the royal court. With its full sleeves, its cinched waistline and its light cotton muslin composition, the garment is reminiscent of the *chemise à la reine*—a style made popular by the Bourbon Queen Marie Antoinette, captured famously in a 1783 portrait by Elizabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (figure 2). Such artefacts enable us to re-imagine and reassemble the majestic vision set out by the Kingdom of Hayti, which helped to nurture a national discourse that not only centred Black revolutionary pride but also imperial refinement. Indeed, this very idea is bound up with the heritage narrative constructed around it; in the accompanying dossier dispatched to its conservator, the dress was defined as a 'robe Empire' (empire-style dress), and it is highly likely that it was commissioned to be made in Europe (S Bonnet 2020, personal communication, February 25). While it partly fuels the mythology of conspicuous consumption that the Atlantic World presses laboured to disseminate in its narrative representations of the kingdom in the early nineteenth century, it also demonstrates the cross-pollination of ideas and aesthetics across a globalised world and the complexity of navigating

imperial politics in a post-colonial sovereign Black nation.

<Insert Figure 1>

Figure 1: ‘Robe longue en mousseline de coton blanc’ (2019). Image courtesy of the Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien.

<Insert Figure 2>

Figure 2: Yann Caradec, ‘Exposition rétrospective Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun au Grand Palais à Paris, 23 September 2015 to 11 January 2016’ (2015). Public Domain.

As a living transcript that harbours the material testimony of a Black queen and her court, this artefact (and the very fact of its historic preservation) illuminates the radical revolutionary impulse to create and re-create across Black diasporic cultures, and speaks in particular to the ways that Black women in the age of slavery engaged in forms of strategic and symbolic resistance. It also encodes a story of radical endurance. Having survived the experiences of colonialism, revolution, civil unrest, displacement and exile, Marie-Louise Christophe’s personal narrative was, above all else, one of endurance. Following the rebel coup that precipitated Henry Christophe’s suicide on 8 October 1820 and his sons’ subsequent execution, Marie-Louise and her two daughters fled to England, where they were sheltered by the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson before moving to Blackheath and then to Marylebone. In 1824, Marie-Louise left England and, after several years, settled in Pisa, where she died in 1851, outliving both of her daughters and surviving her husband by over thirty years. Though she led a relatively obscure and solitary existence on the European continent, she was frequently spotlighted in scattered narrative accounts, where she is recalled enjoying the restorative environs of the seaside in Hastings, attending St. James’s Catholic church in Marylebone’s Spanish Place, visiting the landscaped gardens of Königswart Castle in Austro-Hungary, eating macaroni in Florence and keeping a fine and well-appointed house in Belgium.

What is clear from these accounts is that the colonialist biases of white, European commentators and history-makers rendered more visible the actions of a woman who was, paradoxically, doing a very good job of blending in. Indeed, despite her aberrance within the North Atlantic colonialist imagination, Marie-Louise continually remade herself according to a European mould of gentility and respectability (James Fenimore Cooper observes her at the opera; she is witnessed to have been on familiar and friendly terms with prominent Italian politicians; and she was known to be an avid church-goer and later benefactor). Yet it was

perhaps her very assertive and wilful ability to endure across these various European landscapes that rendered permeable the imagined borders between the North Atlantic and its ‘savage slot’, presenting an uncanny reminder of her symbolic centrality to the ultimate breakdown of the colonial world order. Furthermore, while it is important to remember that, as an elite woman of colour, Marie-Louise’s experiences were by no means representative of women across the Black Atlantic, the memory of her queenship and her self-preservation as a queen in exile presents for us an archive of revolutionary possibility, shining a light on the myriad women, children and men across the African diaspora who resisted and re-articulated colonial institutions and infrastructures, and whose stories remain largely occluded in dominant white colonialist narratives. In preparation for her death, she enlisted Italian notaries to help her draw up a last will and testament, a copy of which she ordered to be translated and transcribed for the Public Records Office in London (now held at the National Archives in Kew), as if in anticipation of her historical erasure. By re-inscribing her royal identity within the notarised public record Marie-Louise proved that she could literally and metaphorically re-write history, thereby subverting the dominant colonialist ideological stranglehold of the North Atlantic imaginary to preserve her majestic legacy.

In parallel ways, the designation of ‘HRH Princess Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, Countess of Dumbarton and Baroness Kilkeel’, accorded to Meghan Markle upon her marriage to Henry of Wales (The Royal Family 2019), marked a radical ideological departure from a traditionally British and culturally conservative vision of monarchy long preserved in its imperial history (in other words, one that has sustained itself as exclusively white, predominantly male and inherently patriarchal). As Black Studies scholar Kehinde Andrews (2020) has observed, ‘[t]he image of Britannia ruling the waves is wrapped in the majesty of royalty’. Indeed, so pervasive is this idea that Markle has often been deployed by cultural commentators as its counterweight—as a symbolic exemplification of the ‘rebirth’ of the British monarchy within wider North Atlantic cultural discourse, and Markle’s Black heritage has fed a mythology of ‘progress’ in which the Royal Family are conveniently positioned as enlightened, modern and continually relevant while any suggestion of its imperialist underpinnings are conspicuously muted. Such figurative manipulation betrays what Andrews has termed the ‘delusions of the post-racial moment’. Yet despite her repeated symbolic co-optation by white interlocutors, Meghan Markle’s own symbolic engagement with royal tradition has been an active exercise in imperial re-articulation and re-interpretation that, like the first Haitian queen, reflects an effort to assert her own proud, royal identity. Though, as Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin (2018, pp. 1-2) have contended, the radical and socially

transformative proposition presented by Markle has often been overstated, it is crucial to recognise the processes of negotiation and mediation at play between different articulating principles, especially between issues of race and class, and consider how these principles might differently determine Markle's figurative radicalism. Indeed, much like Marie-Louise Christophe, Markle has adopted and adapted the trappings of imperialist monarchy, while, at the same time, creatively contesting the historic colonialist biases and dominant Eurocentric imperialist frameworks that undermine her legitimacy as a Black princess.

This process of mediation and contestation was visually exemplified in the symbolic interplay between elements of Markle's wedding trousseau. Like the fine garments and regalia commissioned for the Kingdom of Hayti, Markle's trousseau—and her veil and tiara in particular—told a story of becoming and belonging, but also of autonomy and inversion. The tiara worn by Markle on her wedding day was an art deco diamond platinum bandeau tiara made in 1932 for Queen Elizabeth's grandmother, Queen Mary, and loaned to Markle from Queen Elizabeth's personal collection. According to the Royal Collection Trust website, '[t]he centre is set with a detachable brooch of ten brilliant diamonds' which was 'given to the then Princess Mary in 1893 by the County of Lincoln on her marriage to Prince George, Duke of York' (Royal Collection Trust n.d.). Conspicuously absent from this description, however, is any reference to the provenance of the diamonds used to make the tiara or any of its component parts. Embedded within this absence is a secreted story of colonial violence, conquest and plunder embodied by the crown jewels more broadly, the Indian Koh-i-Noor and South African Cullinan diamonds being perhaps among the most prominent examples (Boissoneault 2017). However, the conspicuous occlusion of colonial histories from this crown trust heritage narrative was in part borne out through the conscious *inclusion* of colonised subjects within the narrative of the veil with which the tiara was coupled. The veil which was designed, along with Markle's silk wedding gown, by British designer Clare Waight Keller—the first woman to become Artistic Director of the French fashion House of Givenchy—featured embroidered wild flora from the 53 Commonwealth nations, in addition to the Californian poppy: an express request of Markle herself (Mackledon 2018). Although South-Asian historian Aparna Kapadia (2018) criticised the veil's 'arrogant representation' of Commonwealth, especially its perceived insensitivity toward the history of India's textile weavers who were impoverished by aggressive parliamentary laws restricting the sale of Indian-manufactured chintz in the eighteenth century, the gesture made discursively visible subaltern colonial histories that the tiara, and the heritage narrative constructed around it (along with other valuable items held by the crown), continually silences.

Despite the avowed shortcomings of this gesture, it sparked an important dialogue about origins and ownership within the context of colonial history and, in turn, amplified voices which are so often silenced within the discursive framework of heritage, especially within heritage spaces that tell imperial histories. As decolonial activist Sumaya Kassim (2019) observes, for example, ‘museums are not neutral in their preservation of history. Exhibitions still usually assume a white audience and centre the white gaze.’ Though such gestures may not provide restitution equal to repatriation, art historian William Dalrymple contends that ‘disseminating the true narrative[s]’ of colonial objects ‘is half the battle’ (qtd. in Boissoneault 2017). That this dialogue was advanced by a Black interlocutor made its message all the more compelling, according to African American fashion journalist and current editor of *Teen Vogue*, Lindsay Peoples Wagner, who celebrated the fact that Markle ‘literally had black nations on her back’ as one of the ‘7 Best Black Joy Moments at the Royal Wedding’. Alternative media outlets thus framed Markle’s veil as a symbol of solidarity and racial pride, and, by extension, Markle as an ambassador for former colonised populations.

In these counternarratives of inclusion and uplift, Markle has helped to inform a progressive and inclusive vision of monarchy that decentres the North Atlantic geography of imagination and converges around Black pride. Though problematised by its complex interrelationship with monarchy’s underlying systems of dominance, this vision of Black majesty presents an obvious symbolic challenge to the colonialist infrastructures that have dominated Atlantic world histories. Though Markle, like Marie-Louise Christophe before her, has had to mediate white imperialist European frameworks, her very existence within and her presumed efforts to rewrite the colonialist historical narrative represent a symbolic intervention that presents an alternative to histories of subaltern abjection, enslavement and domination. Their voices and material testimonies exist as a collective rebuttal against white, male, colonialist history-makers who have colluded in the invisibilisation and erasure of Black women’s histories across the diaspora. While their historic experiences are by no means representative of those often occluded women in Atlantic World history, it is therefore important to recognise their symbolic intervention as Black female interlocutors and the symbolic value that Black diasporic cultural agents have invested in the imagined possibilities of a countercultural Black majesty that they have come to signify.

Egyptian Queens, Creole Histories and Diasporic Futures

The incorporation, adaptation and re-articulation of Black majestic iconography has

contributed to the construction of a radical and female-centric vision of Black empowerment in modern popular culture. This is evidenced in the mythic cosmologies of Black female popular cultural icons such as Nicki Minaj, Janelle Monáe and—most conspicuously—Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (notoriously hailed by her fanbase as ‘Queen Bey’). Within these cosmic landscapes, motifs of queenship ranging from regalia, thrones and jewels to imagery that recalls the memory of real majestic icons in history are repeatedly redeployed to reinforce an aesthetic of Black majesty. This aesthetic centralises Black diasporic cultural pride and womanist theologies of women-led community uplift, yet also draws on and re-assembles the historic imperialist trappings of monarchy to complicate the colonial past and present a destabilising, Black-centric vision of the future. Meghan Markle’s ascendancy to the British royal family has occurred alongside this cultural moment and has contributed symbolically to the discourses it has generated.

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s carefully choreographed choice to accept a Brit award for best international group in 2019 (along with her husband, Shawn ‘Jay-Z’ Carter) standing in front of a majestic portrait of Meghan Markle, represents a case in point. The illustration, created by American artist Tim O’Brien (figure 4), depicts a bejewelled Markle in Victorian dress with exposed décolletage and sleek, bobbed hair, wearing a diamond fleur-de-lys tiara. Curiously, the tiara depicted is not modelled on any of the tiaras from the British Crown collection, but rather on a tiara owned by the Spanish Royal Family, originally bestowed upon Victoria Eugenie of Battenburg, a granddaughter of Victoria I (figure 5). Affirming the connections and interrelationships between various dynastic bloodlines, the symbolic invocation of Meghan Markle further compounds this vision, upholding a vision of queenship that is complicated by intersecting histories and diasporic mobilities. In a subsequent Instagram post (2019), Knowles-Carter paid tribute to Markle as ‘one of our melanated Monas’, signalling to perceptive observers that Markle’s portrait occupies a space typically associated with the portrait of the Mona Lisa, which features prominently in their music video ‘Apesh!t’, which was shot entirely at the Louvre—a ‘creative strategy’ that Elodie Silberstein (2019, p. 135) suggests ‘undermine[s] the foundations of a hegemonic visual culture rooted in a long history of alienation of the black female body’. Indeed, in this curated landscape, Knowles-Carter challenges the notion that Black queens should attempt to reimagine and re-articulate the established infrastructures of Eurocentric, imperialist and colonialist cultures, supporting Audre Lorde’s contention that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’. Indeed, Lorde contends that, for ‘those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference’ it is important to learn ‘how to stand alone, unpopular

and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish' (2018, loc. 30). Like Lorde, Knowles-Carter presents an insurgent Black feminist proposition that urges Black women to both agitate *against* and actively re-inscribe their presence *within* the discourses of absence, violence and erasure, celebrating proud and majestic Black diasporic lineages and creating a pathway for majestic diasporic futures.

<Insert Figure 3>

Figure 3: Tim O'Brien, 'Meghan Markle' (2018). Reproduced with the permission of Tim O'Brien.

<Insert Figure 4>

Figure 4: Antonio Cánovas del Castillo y Vallejo (Kaulak), 'Queen Victoria Eugenia of Spain' (1925). Public Domain.

This insurgent act of re-inscription was undoubtedly given more compelling currency by the fact that 'Queen Bey' was the principal vector for its transmission. Indeed, since the advent of the 'Mrs Carter Show' world tour of 2013, Knowles-Carter has attempted to cultivate her majestic self-image within the popular cultural imagination. In the video commercial that was produced for the tour by Jonas Åkerlund, the perceptible Rococo aesthetics, corsets, golden panniers and more general signifiers of excess incorporated into the styling converge to evoke the memory of the ancien régime, and most especially the Court of King Louis XVI. Like Marie-Louise Christophe, whose court aesthetics paralleled the high tastes of Marie-Antoinette, Knowles-Carter's reinterpretation of imperialist majestic styles works to affirm the legitimacy of her majestic ascendancy. This Rococo aesthetic is complicated, however, by the incorporation of the Medici-style collar into Knowles-Carter's costume, which closely resembles the wing-shaped collar popularised by Elizabeth I. This image is echoed by a close-up shot depicting a portrait of Knowles-Carter in Elizabethan costume which closely resembles the 1588 Spanish Armada portrait of Elizabeth I (Royal Museums Greenwich n.d.) and into the direction of which Knowles-Carter is seen to gaze (figure 5), which creates a partial mirror. Given the fact of Knowles-Carter's enslaved heritage (Coleman 2018), the aesthetic choice to invoke the memory of Elizabeth I, who gave sanction to the first English slave voyage in 1562, represents the ultimate act of carnivalesque inversion. The historic specificity of Knowles-Carter's majestic vision is further unsettled by the presence of backing dancers styled in nineteenth-century military uniforms and cocked hats. The contention between various suggested time periods in this stylistic frame (across

which France exists as both a Bourbon monarchy and a revolutionary republic) destabilises the absolute certainty of monarchy and alludes to the possibility of its radical overhaul. At the same time, it presents a vision of transgenerational Blackness that points to the history of white supremacist and colonialist violence. In this sense, the only enduring certainty within this majestic universe is the symbolic centrality of Black womanhood.

<Insert Figure 5>

Figure 5: Bianca Li, 'Beyonce Jonas Akerlund's O2 directors cut' (2013). Screenshot.

The trope of Black majesty was taken up once again in Knowles-Carter's 2016 visual album *Lemonade*. The 'Formation' sequence, in particular, marks a triumphal celebration of Knowles-Carter's 'Texas-Bama' and Louisiana Creole heritage, while at the same time presenting a critique of the prevailing racial and structural inequalities of the region, which are encapsulated in the repeated references to Hurricane Katrina, which wrought devastation on Black communities in the Deep South. Pointedly, however, Knowles-Carter disbands here with European aesthetics of royalty in favour of the victoriana fashions of Southern plantation aristocracy, symbolically highlighting the ways in which systems of imperial and colonial dominance were replicated within republican regimes across the North Atlantic. A close-up shot of her daughter, Blue Ivy Carter, dancing in one of the numerous stately parlour rooms of Madewood Plantation in Louisiana coincides with the lyrical utterance 'I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros', symbolically dismantling the ideological infrastructure of the plantation system, which sought to obliterate kinship networks, and denied enslaved people from creating meaningful legacies through 'heirs' of their own. Blue Ivy's physical presence here also serves as a visual reminder that she is the primary 'heir' to the Knowles-Carter dynasty, a dynasty that, as of June 2019, stood at \$1.4 billion (O'Malley Greenburg 2019). This visual cue subverts the conventional white-supremacist structural logic of the plantation, suggesting that Black women once designated 'property' and on whose legal status chattel slavery was once contingent, can, within Knowles-Carter's cosmic vision, become 'proprietors' of their own bodies, lands and material wealth. This subversive staging within the micro-geography of the southern plantation—and in the 'Big House' in particular—upholds Katherine McKittrick's contention that the plantation 'is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future' (2013, p. 10).

The specific veneration of Blue Ivy's 'baby hair and afro' in this sequence also represents a subversive choice for Knowles-Carter, who, as Lauren Michele Jackson (2018)

has highlighted, ‘embraces the gamut of black hair’—a statement that is as true of her multiple renderings throughout the visual album as it is of her myriad metamorphoses in public life. Indeed, Blue Ivy’s ‘afro’, juxtaposed with shots of Beyoncé variously sporting an array of different hairstyles—long blonde braids, tousled curls, long plaits, Kahlo-esque crown braids, coiffed top-knots—in addition to hair adornments such as hats and head wraps, represents a symbolic rebuttal against ‘Becky with the good hair’. As Janell Hobson observes, this cryptic figure ‘haunts the narrative’ of *Lemonade* and represents ‘the “Other Woman” writ large: White Womanhood as a negation of black beauty and black femininity’ (2019, p. 34; p. 32). These multiple articulations and re-articulations of Black hair amplify the joy and magic of Black women’s bodies, both in their ‘natural’ and historically derided formulations and as sites/sights of creative and diasporic reinvention. Hair is transformed in *Lemonade* into a majestic transcript: brandished as evidence not only of personhood, but of regal Black femininity. As such, Knowles-Carter re-inscribes within spaces of erasure and colonial violence diasporic hair journeys that pay homage to those ancestors who were denied the tools of inscription.

Elsewhere in the visual album, Knowles-Carter’s braids are sculpted to create the illusion of a cylindrical headpiece reminiscent of the cap-crown worn by Nefertiti, who contemporary scholarship has attempted to re-situate firmly within the pantheon of Black history. This iconography was more palpably visible in her 2018 ‘Beychella’ set. Offering what Black Studies scholar La TaSha Levy (2018) has called a ‘counterforce to [the whitewashed and] decrepit images’ of ancient Egypt, Knowles-Carter’s opening Coachella sequence ‘boldly tied Ancient Africa, and Egypt in particular, to a legacy of Black genius in the African Diaspora.’ The various models of royalty, birthright and queenship manifested in these productions thus engage her audiences to dig deep and decolonise the collective mind. This message is especially pertinent given the contested ownership of Nefertiti’s bust, which is currently held by the Neues Museum in Berlin—an institution replete with colonial plunder.

Markle’s own Black diasporic roots and routes (Gilroy 1993, p. 19) have likewise been deployed in the service of a popular cultural narrative that has sought to combat the targeted colonialist assaults against Markle as an individual, to reinforce the multiplicity and richness of Atlantic royal histories more broadly and to affirm and rehabilitate the presence of Black women within those histories. The announcement of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex’s engagement, for example, gave rise to a proliferation of media stories illuminating the personal histories of other Black princesses across the modern Atlantic World (Hazelwood

2019), engaging with the complicated racial lineages of the British royal family (Waxman 2018; Brown 2018) and exploring the cultural significance of Black queenship within Black diasporic communities (Rupert 2018; St-Esprit 2018; Stoney 2017). Nowhere were allusions to Markle's own Black diasporic history more manifest than in the Duke and Duchess's wedding ceremony on 19 May 2018. The inclusion of an all-Black gospel choir, who performed a rendition of Benny E. King's Rhythm and Blues song 'Stand by Me', and Bishop Michael Curry, the head of the American Episcopal Church who gave a 'rousing address' that, as Grant Shreve (2018) notes, 'communicated a liberationist vision of divine love, interwoven with texts and songs from the long history of the African diaspora, including snatches of slave spirituals and quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.', was a decidedly political statement that captivated the popular imaginary. By amplifying diasporic countercultural voices as she crossed the threshold into the British Royal Family, Markle figuratively reset the terms of the debate, challenging colonialist cultural assumptions around ideas of imperial lineage and focusing the spotlight on Black diasporic lineages that—despite numerous and recurrent colonialist assaults—survive and thrive in multiple creative, expressive and imaginative cultural forms. Like Knowles-Carter's marriage of diasporic and majestic tropes across her recent oeuvre and Marie-Louise Christophe's pledge of allegiance to her Haitian homeland in her last will and testament (Willson et al 2019), this act of Black diasporic cultural avowal helped to shape a powerful and uplifting narrative of Black majesty which counteracts the dominant white colonialist metanarrative that centres imperialist Euro-centric visions of monarchy.

Majestic Possibilities; Neoliberal Constraints

By reaching back to African diasporic pasts that have so often been subjected to the colonialist violence, nullification, neglect and invisibilisation of North Atlantic history-makers, while at the same time looking forward to decolonial and Afro-centric futures that re-articulate and re-inscribe Black bodies within the popular consciousness, Marie-Louise Christophe, Meghan Markle and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter have each in turn shaped a powerful politics and aesthetics of Black majesty. This said, the institution of monarchy, which is so deeply intertwined with structures of domination, and its symbolic invocation and re-articulation by rich and powerful cultural interlocutors who often 'erase the intersectional inequalities in institutional and social structures' (Clancy and Yelin 2020), continue to problematise and undermine its radical and revolutionary potency. Black feminist theorist bell hooks's searing indictment of Knowles-Carter's *Lemonade* and its perceived

commodification of the Black female body that she criticised as neither ‘radical [n]or revolutionary’ opens up questions of who has access within this Black majestic cosmology and how such a poetics and aesthetics of Black majesty can dismantle imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal systems of domination when it is articulated through the neoliberal language of ‘capitalist money making’ (hooks 2016). The visual album invariably cultivates the idea that Beyoncé’s ‘queenship’ is self-made and acquired through sheer perseverance, resilience and a determination to ‘slay all day’. In the ‘Anger’/‘Don’t Hurt Yourself’ sequence, she shout-raps the lyrics ‘Keep your money/I got my own’, imitating the ‘neoliberal hustlers’ such as Jay-Z, 50 Cent and Kanye West who Black Studies scholar Paul Gilroy (2013, p. 31) has argued as evincing an ‘enthusiasm for the selfish pursuit of riches’ in their work. This viewpoint is compounded by the symbolic inclusion of ‘Yeezy’ sportswear within the sequence, the highly lucrative sports clothing line of Kanye West. That the visual album was disseminated through and used to strategically market Shaun Jay-Z Carter’s streaming service, Tidal, at the moment of its launch also lends credence to this idea.

Moreover, Clancy has highlighted that Markle’s own brand of activism draws on neoliberal language of individual empowerment, undermining the potency of intersectional movements that agitate for collective resistance against multiple and interconnected infrastructures of oppression (2019). Since her entrance into the Royal Family, Markle’s voice has been repeatedly silenced and co-opted (and her activism decidedly moderated, operating largely through the public relations mouthpiece of Kensington Palace), signposting the less-than-liberal strictures of royal life and the prevailing conservative constraints of the monarchy as an institution. As Kenan Malik (2019) has highlighted, ‘[m]aking inherited privilege more “diverse” is hardly a step forward in the battle against racial inequality’. Indeed, regardless of whether or not the monarchy serves any meaningful function within the apparatuses of state, the monarchy remains a conservative, patriarchal institution that reifies social and economic structures of inequality, and Markle functions symbolically within this landscape to give ‘these structures new life and relevance’ (Clancy and Yelin 2018, p. 2). A similar critique could be applied to Marie-Louise Christophe.⁴

The Duke and Duchess’s decision in early 2020 to ‘take a step back as “senior” members of the Royal Family’ (2020) confounds further still any easy critique of the

⁴ On presenting recent findings on the ‘revolutionary’ life of Marie-Louise Christophe at the Haitian Studies Association conference at the University of Florida in Gainesville in October 2019, Francophone Studies scholar Martin Munro asked me whether it was truly appropriate to label her ‘revolutionary’, suggesting that it was adequate and indeed important to tell her interesting story.

representational force of Black majesty. Although the Duke and Duchess have demonstrated a commitment to economic independence, relinquishing their ‘HRH’ titles and their entitlement to an income from the Sovereign Grant, and to repaying the taxpayer-funded renovations to their Windsor Castle home, Frogmore Cottage, it is difficult to assess just how ‘radical’ such a manoeuvre can be constituted. While the conservative media pundit Piers Morgan’s suggestion that ‘they just wanted the freedom to whore out their royal names to the highest planet-wrecking investment bank bidders’ (2020) uses rhetoric designed to inflame already hostile attitudes toward the couple, and to Markle in particular, critics might legitimately question the Sussexes’ financial motivations in light of the highly commercialised rebranding exercise carried out under the auspices of the ‘Sussex’ name to which the official website of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and their attendant social media accounts seem to hint. Certainly, conversations generated around these developments have invariably highlighted the subtle distinction between imperial inheritances and neoliberal commercial dynasties.

What the many critical engagements with each of these women inevitably show is that the stakes in relation to their progressive politics, and the attendant expectations that they generate, are considerably high. In a Black feminist roundtable on bell hooks, Beyoncé, and “Moving Beyond Pain”, journalist Sesali Bowen (n.d.) argued of hooks, ‘I feel almost certain that what she wants from Beyoncé is something that she herself has yet to bring to the table. It must be stated that despite her brilliant theories on love, feminism, and imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that have enhanced the theoretical capacities of thousands, hooks has yet to “bring exploitation and domination to an end.”’ Similarly, Mary McGill’s analysis of media representations of Meghan Markle and Kate Middleton shows that Markle has been consistently held to significantly higher standards (forthcoming). Although the formula and the means of execution might be imperfect, there is little doubt that the phenomenon of Black majesty has had a convulsive impact within the cultural imaginary, creating or otherwise exposing points of rupture along colonial fault-lines. By decentring the colonial gaze and remaking imperial lineages, Black queens and princesses, both real and imagined, have created a discursive platform for the numerous women who are so often passed over. These sentiments were echoed in a feature on Meghan Markle put together by 14 Black women for the women’s magazine *Elle*. In this feature, feminist activist Jamia Wilson commended Markle for ‘lifting as she climbs’ (qtd in Hall and Webb 2018). Hannah Yelin and Michele Paule’s study of women in the public eye has likewise helped to crystallise the notion that young women of colour feel seen and heard when they see their histories and their

possible futures represented and reflected by powerful Black women (Yelin and Paule 2020).

Revolution is almost always an unfinished project, composed of multiple lapses, fissures, curtailments and reoccurrences. Neither is it always a ‘radical’ or subaltern endeavour. The Haitian Revolution emerged, in part, out of a subaltern slave rebellion, but also grew out of the republican ideologies cultivated and upheld by an elite, free-coloured bourgeois class that had significant economic and social purchase. Henry Christophe oversaw the burning of the colony’s most prized and lucrative port city, only to rebuild an imposing Black kingdom on that very site of revolutionary cataclysm—one that, according to some (including Haiti’s own history-makers), would later become the hallmark of tyranny and despotism. After the republican, Girondin and Napoleonic revolutions in France, a monarchy was temporarily restored, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, the North Atlantic world was dominated by monarchies. The social, political, cultural and economic landscape of the North Atlantic world in the present likewise looks very different to that of the mid-nineteenth century. Though it may not resemble a progressive, wilful and collective act of subaltern upheaval, the revolutionary wheel continues to turn through these real articulations and symbolic manifestations of Black majesty, creating reverberations that have a destabilising impact on the colonialist imagination. And yet, it remains true that, as Haitian feminist Madeleine Sylvain Boucherou (1957, p. 1) once wrote, ‘L’histoire de l’haïtienne est encore à écrire’ (the history of the Haitian woman is yet to be written). This statement could also be more broadly applied to the insurgent, creative and alternative histories of women across the African diaspora. The concept of Black majesty remains contentious and indeed merits further and more extensive critical analysis in both history and culture, but the very inscription of these stories in the public record, their reproduction in dominant discourse and their re-assembly by dedicated scholars, artists, activists and heritage specialists makes them all the more visible, traceable and triumphant. These acts of creation, re-creation and excavation represent unsettling multimodal rebuttals against the project of colonialism.

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