

## A New Wrinkle: Age, Race and Writing Meghan Markle

Abstract: This article analyses *Vanity Fair*'s reference to Meghan Markle's biracial identity as a 'wrinkle' as part of a broader tendency to discuss that identity in terms of a dynamic of crisis and resolution. The article contrasts Andrew Morton's biography, *Meghan: A Hollywood Princess* (2018) with two texts by Meghan, a 2015 essay for *Elle* magazine, and her guest edited issue of *British Vogue* (2019). All endeavour to manage the 'wrinkle' of Meghan's biracial identity, for very different purposes. The *Vanity Fair* article and Morton's text attempt to 'smooth out' her biracial identity by displacing it through discussion of some other aspect of identity (such as age, illustrated by the term 'wrinkle'), or they preserve the 'wrinkle' by maintaining an understanding of her biracial identity as problematic and disruptive. In contrast, Meghan's acts of self-representation refuse to 'smooth out' her biracial identity, and also reject an understanding of it as negatively disruptive.

In a *Vanity Fair* interview in October 2017, one month before her engagement to Prince Harry was formally announced, it was claimed that Meghan Markle's relationship had come under 'harsh criticism' in the United Kingdom (Kashner, 2017, 93). In addition to being Catholic and divorced, two identities which historically barred individuals from inclusion in the royal family, Meghan 'adds a new wrinkle: her mother is black, her father white' (Kashner, 2017, 93). It is clear that Meghan's biracial<sup>1</sup> identity is understood to be the primary cause of 'harsh criticism.' Despite Kashner's acknowledgement that such an understanding has produced racist criticism, and his own sympathetic discussion of Meghan, the phrase 'a new wrinkle' confers negative associations of its own. One definition of a wrinkle is 'a small furrow or crease in the skin, especially of the face, as from raging or frowning' ([dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)). This usefully reinforces the negative and disapproving context in which, it is suggested, Meghan's biracial identity is perceived in the UK, with the article identifying 'tabloids' and 'trolls' as the main sources of criticism (93).

Referring to Meghan's mixed-race identity as a 'wrinkle' communicates a number of ideas simultaneously and ambiguously. In Western societies which valorise youth, wrinkles on skin are often to be disguised or erased. The pressure to get rid of wrinkles is undoubtedly more sharply experienced by women, who suffer more from being valued in relation to physical appearance and thus from the effects of ageing, often understood as decline (see, for example,

Jermyn and Holmes, 2015). The belief that wrinkles are best rendered invisible applies not only to the body; an individual makes a better impression if their clothes are smooth, and a common idiom is to ‘iron out wrinkles’ in a problem. In these examples, the wrinkle motif functions as one of a number of ‘marks of time’ (Miller, 2002, 100), and prompts a response (disguising, ironing out).

One excerpt from Hilary Mantel’s “Royal Bodies” essay captures all these meanings. Mantel describes Diana’s emergence from her coach on her wedding day:

The dress’s first effect was dismaying. I could hear a nation of women catching their breath as one, not in awe but in horror: it’s creased to glory, how did they let that happen? I heard the seaquake as a million ironing boards unfolded, a sigh and shudder as a collective nightmare came true: that dream we all have, that we are incorrectly dressed or not dressed at all, that we are naked in the street. But as the dress resolved about her, the princess was born and the world breathed out. (Mantel, 2013)

Here, the anticipation of a wrinkle or wrinkles (the ‘creased’ dress) is feared. The presence of wrinkles is disruptive, and must be ‘resolved.’ The fear of the creased wedding dress can be read as anxiety about a woman having a (sexual) history (a virginal identity was key to early representations of Diana). The fear is ‘resolved’ by rendering that history manageable, or by erasing it (the ironing boards unfold); and the fear is in the end unnecessary (there are no creases).

Despite (or rather, because) of the centrality of whiteness in this excerpt (the dress, the woman, the raced standards of acceptable femininity as norm and ideal) this article hypothesises that the dynamic presented by the wrinkle, of crisis and resolution, underpins a number of written representations of Meghan Markle. It is present in the *Vanity Fair* interview, although how the ‘new wrinkle’ of Meghan’s biracial identity is a problem is not very explicitly discussed (the problem is, if course, how Meghan’s racial identity should be understood and how a biracial American woman might be accommodated within the white British royal family), and it is certainly not clear how it should be resolved. Despite the article’s positive portrayal of Meghan, readers may be encouraged to consider her biracial identity as something which *is* an issue, but a minor one (one way to think about a wrinkle). The overall impression from the article is that while inclusion of a biracial American woman in the UK royal family may be notable, it should not be concerning, or deserve criticism. However, a more disturbing reading is also present here. Just as a wrinkle can be ironed out to minimise or eliminate its existence, perhaps resolution is found in acting as if there is no ‘wrinkle’: that is, it is preferable not to talk about Meghan’s biracial identity at all (in a paradoxical move, removing the wrinkle

means displacing discussion of biracial identity, effected by referring to it as a wrinkle).

This article considers what is at stake in the dynamic of crisis and resolution called into being by the 'wrinkle' motif, as it symbolises and is prompted by Meghan's biracial identity. It begins by exploring what is at stake in the use of age to discuss race, as the *Vanity Fair* interview does. It then examines how Andrew Morton's biography, *Meghan: A Hollywood Princess* (2018) and two texts by Meghan herself, a 2015 essay for *Elle* magazine, and her guest edited issue of *British Vogue* (2019), work to 'resolve' the 'wrinkle' of her biracial identity. This examination illustrates Hannah Yelin's argument that celebrity memoir must be understood as 'a negotiated terrain which makes its negotiations exceptionally visible on the page' (Yelin, 2020, 269). By contrasting Meghan's self-representation with representations of her by others (Morton and the *Vanity Fair* article), it is apparent that across all these texts a biracial identity is seen as something to be 'managed' (that is, visibly negotiated) because of the way it troubles dominant constrictions of identity categories and the (often racist) value judgments made about them. That management takes the form of making biracial identity legible in ways that necessitate discussing additional identity categories (gender, age, nation), revealing some of the challenges, limitations and possibilities of writing identity intersectionally.

#### Age writing race

When the phrase 'a new wrinkle' is invoked in the *Vanity Fair* interview, a concept associated with ageing (the wrinkle) is used to discuss race. Patricia Hill Collins and Silma Bilge argue that 'criticising this kind of analogous thinking has been a cornerstone of intersectional thought and praxis' (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016, 110). They describe such 'analogous thinking' as rooted in 'a tendency to draw parallels between the experiences of oppressed groups for the purpose of advocating on behalf of one's own group' (108). The 'new wrinkle' phrase in *Vanity Fair* is employed in an example of analogous thinking, but rather than drawing comparisons between oppressed groups to argue for recognition of one group, an attempt is made to render Meghan's biracial identity *less* fraught, to minimise its significance (yet crucially, without erasing that significance), by comparing it to a category of oppression likely to be understood as less charged (age). Criticising this strategy is equally vital, however, because it shares two problematic outcomes with the analogies Hill Collins and Bilge focus on; it renders one part of an individual identity dominant (age diminishes race) and it 'buys into the post-race myth that fallaciously declares that racism has lapsed, so we may self-congratulate and move on to the next checkbox' (110). The use of age to discuss race in the *Vanity Fair* article enacts that

post-race myth in a number of ways. It reduces the complexities of the inclusion of a biracial woman in the British royal family to a ‘wrinkle,’ a minor issue that glosses over racism in relation to the royal family as institution, and in relation to British cultural attitudes. It suggests that if inclusion of such a woman *is* a problem it is one reserved for the royal family, tabloids and trolls (that is, not implicating the article or its readers). And it suggests that it is more comfortable or acceptable to discuss race in terms of age.

Russell Meeuf’s study of non-normative bodies and contemporary stardom offers a useful model for thinking further about what is operative in the interview’s use of the category of age to discuss race. Meeuf analyses a number of contemporary American film and television stars with non-normative bodies, such as Lena Dunham and Gadbourey Sidibe. He claims that ‘Like their predecessors, these new generations of stars with non-normative bodies produce images and narratives that smooth out the ideological contradictions of identity’ (Meeuf, 2017, 12). The action of ‘smoothing out’ is explained: ‘while all the stars analysed here deviate in one way or another from cultural norms of beauty and a ‘normal’ body, in each instance the fears produced by such a deviation are displaced onto other categories of identity in order to manage their persona’ (25). He argues that this management occurs primarily through middle-class gender norms, which function as a kind of ‘master category within a neoliberal world of diversity’ (28). This process is illustrated by using the phrase ‘a new wrinkle’ to refer to (or, to manage) Meghan’s biracial identity, understood as central to her ‘persona’. The gendered aspects of ageing (a wrinkled appearance is especially undesirable for women) work to facilitate the process by which Meghan’s age is used to ‘smooth out’ the ‘deviation’ of her biracial identity. In Meeuf’s terms, the fears produced by biracial identity are displaced onto age. In using Meeuf’s work to apply to Meghan, I am claiming that she is a ‘star’ with a ‘star image’ and ‘star texts’ in Richard Dyer’s terms (1997), as a result of both her acting career and celebrity identity before and after her marriage.

However, Meeuf’s model of ‘smoothing out’ a star’s ideological contradictions as made manifest in a non-normative body has limitations when considering the use of age to write race in relation to Meghan. Here, the ‘smoothing out’ is effected by bringing in a concept that is anything *but* smooth – the wrinkle. In the *Vanity Fair* interview – and, I would argue, in many other representations and discussions of Meghan – it is debatable whether much ‘smoothing out’ happens. Meghan’s biracial embodiment, her representations, her ‘star text,’ are constructed as a wrinkle, or wrinkles. They constitute ‘ideological contradictions’ which disturb the smooth surface or appearance of the mainstream world she belongs to (its dominant values, stories). Recalling the creased wedding dress in Mantel’s essay, these wrinkles

constitute a crisis requiring resolution. But different writers and occasions ‘resolve’ this crisis in different ways; for some, this may require maintaining an understanding of Meghan’s biracial identity as a disruptive, unresolved ‘wrinkle’; for others it may require efforts of smoothing out which necessitate using another aspect of her identity. In the remainder of this article I wish to explore three very different texts which attempt to ‘manage’ the wrinkle of her biracial identity, for varying purposes. I argue that Andrew Morton’s biographical representation of Meghan is highly ambivalent, illustrating both the desire to smooth out her biracial identity as a ‘wrinkle’ and the desire to maintain an understanding of it as such. He wishes to manage or ‘resolve’ her biracial identity out of existence, but also constructs it as crucial to the qualities which make her a ‘wrinkle’ in the sense of a disruptive presence. All his efforts result in highly problematic representations relating to race. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Meghan’s autobiographical texts effectively embrace her potential as a ‘wrinkle,’ in much more sophisticated and positive ways. She does so not in order to ‘smooth out’ her biracial identity but to turn its disruptive potential into a means of embracing the complexities of her identity, and managing her public persona and its associations with activism and inclusiveness. This is a strategy of writing the self not without risks, but one which is much more nuanced and successful than Morton’s problematic attempts to write Meghan.

### Morton writes Meghan

The publication of Morton’s biography in 2018 appears opportunistic, timed to capitalise on public interest in Meghan following the engagement announcement. His reputation as biographer of royal figures, most notably Princess Diana, means that his decision to take on Meghan as a subject functions to pre-emptively mark her inclusion within the royal family. Giselle Bastin argues that in his biography of Diana, Morton positions himself as ‘royal protector and champion of Diana’s honour,’ a stance indebted to codes of courtly love and chivalric romance (Bastin, 2010, 8). Morton takes up a different stance towards Meghan, best revealed when he describes an early encounter with the British public:

She looked a tad nervous, as well she might, and Harry frequently put his arm around her and whispered encouragement in her ear. Introducing herself as Meghan, she quickly got used to the English default conversation, chatting about the weather. (In LA it’s the freeway traffic.) (Morton, 2018, 249)

The line in parenthesis (‘in LA it’s the freeway traffic’) shows how Morton sees his role as

mediator, to introduce and explain Meghan to the British public. Opening his text, he makes much of how it is simply through luck that he happens to have connections to LA, where Meghan grew up, as his wife is from Southern California and they spend a significant amount of time there (ix). He claims familiarity with Meghan and her career. All this establishes his credentials as her biographer, alluding to intimacy with the subject which is key to establishing the legitimacy of biographies. Morton is in an Anglo-American marriage. He is familiar with the culture in which Meghan grew up, and with Meghan herself. He is, therefore, supposedly well qualified to introduce her to UK readers. Even the focus on 'luck' is deliberate; the prologue is titled 'the stars were aligned,' which could refer to both the royal romance and the biographical project. Hermione Lee's claim that 'biography may, indeed, be a kind of marriage' is resonant in many ways in relation to this text (Lee 2009, 134). Morton later notes that Meghan kept a copy of his biography of Diana on her bookshelf (53), suggesting that his own role is predestined, casting legitimacy not just on the project but on his representation of her.

This mediating stance also matters because Morton engages in an effort of one-upmanship regarding Meghan's personal history, explaining Meghan to herself. He says that in the 1870 official census

Stephen Ragland stuck with his former master's surname and his given name. Not quite as romantic as 'Wisdom', the name Meghan believes great-great-great-grandfather Ragland chose when he was given the chance to make a fresh start. As she wrote for *Elle* magazine in July 2015: 'Perhaps the closest thing connecting me to my ever-complex family tree, my longing to know where I came from, and the commonality that links me to my bloodline, is the choice that my great-great-great grandfather made to start anew. He chose the last name Wisdom.' (11)

He stresses Meghan's error: 'Sadly, the professional genealogists and researchers who have carefully investigated her history point out that the records, albeit sketchy and contradictory, show that he kept his original name' (12). His insistence on correcting her 'belief' has the result of challenging the 'connection' which means most to her regarding her history, and risks dismantling the story she tells about who she is. His correction lays claim to the supremacy of his representation of Meghan over her own.

While Morton's role of informed mediator can be construed as friendly, it is important to note that he is not adopting the role of champion or protector towards Meghan. This is not to say that he is hostile towards her; at least, not overtly so (an important qualifier). To the extent that a protective stance is present in Morton's positioning, it is primarily directed towards his (assumed British) readers. They may also require reassurance about the impact of Meghan's inclusion in the royal family, particularly given the problematic construction of her

biracial identity as ‘a new wrinkle,’ discussed above. It is tempting to transpose and modify Diane Negra's observation that ‘the careers of certain actresses instantiate a ‘crisis of assimilation’ where Hollywood and its audience undertake the roles of benign host and sponsor to the foreign ‘other’” (Negra 2001, 4), to claim that Morton conceives of Meghan’s forthcoming marriage as a ‘crisis of assimilation’ in relation to the royal family or more widely; a crisis which, once more, allows him to construct himself as ‘host’. This construction of crisis then requires that he provide a resolution.

Morton is not an entirely benign host, and does not entirely reassure his readers. It is in relation to this ‘crisis of assimilation’ that his ambivalent efforts to both preserve and smooth out Meghan’s mixed-race identity as a ‘wrinkle’ are deployed. His portrayal of Meghan is largely positive and flattering. His text contains little explicit criticism of her, with the exception of an important section in which he claims that ‘her friends in Los Angeles noted the change in her now that she was on her way up’ (122), attributing to them a feeling that now she is successful, she neglects them. But he endorses their views: ‘a networker to her fingertips, she seemed to be carefully recalibrating her life, forging new friendships with those who could burnish and develop her career’ (122). Additionally, his narrative is marked by numerous insinuations and inferences casting aspersions on her character. Notably, he compares her unfavourably with Diana as a model of femininity. Morton claims that while Diana ‘broke through the barriers of class and ethnicity on both sides of the Atlantic, her appeal as a celebrity lay as much in her vulnerability as in her star status,’ and continues, ‘the word vulnerable does not immediately spring to mind when assessing Ms Markle’s many splendid qualities’ (275). Early in the text he makes petty comments about Meghan’s acting career, noting that her characters have been depicted having sex or taking drugs:

(Meghan might note that while the palace have ordered her website, *The Tig* – which contained intelligent and well-written essays about gender equality and race – to be scrubbed from the World Wide web, videos of her very unprincess-like behaviour remain for all to see.)

(5)

Morton disingenuously elides Meghan with the parts she plays (‘her unprincess-like behaviour’), and capitalises on historical associations of actresses as disreputable, particularly in relation to sexuality. Gilli Bush-Bailey’s history of the British actress accounts for these wider associations; she notes that ‘the very public sphere in which [the actress’s] craft was practiced quickly led to parallels with prostitution in a patriarchal society employing the binaries of private/public, virgin/whore as constructs of femininity’, and claims further that ‘the elision between her public and private identity, the visual spectacle of her acting body *on*

stage and the availability of her sexually active body *off* stage, reveals a bifocal perspective that has captured the popular imagination, underpinned biographies and histories of the actress and [ . . . ] fuelled a lucrative trade in gossip for over three hundred years' (Bush-Bailey, in Gale and Stokes, 2008, 15).

Morton's fixation on the sexual content of Meghan's roles engages in the kind of 'gossip' discussed above; it also comes uncomfortably close to exploiting and perpetuating racist stereotypes about African American women and mixed-race women as lascivious, and gives little consideration to the kinds of pressures and difficulties Meghan may have had to negotiate in her acting career, due to a combination of racism and sexism. Lynette Goddard notes that 'questions surrounding stereotyped roles are a key concern for black actresses, particularly those relating to sexuality and sexual objectification on stage' as these have origins in racist constructions of black women as 'hypersexual' (Goddard, in Gale and Stokes, 2008, 223, 224). Morton does not acknowledge any of this, or how it might affect discussion of Meghan's career and roles. Instead, the videos, like Morton's insinuating passages themselves, might be understood negatively as 'wrinkles,' cast by Morton as marks on Meghan's history which she might (should?) be ashamed of and would prefer were removed from view. They provide evidence for readers hostile to her, suggesting that there are elements of her history which the palace has had to 'smooth out' in order to make her acceptable for inclusion. At the same time, they court readers' prurience (the excerpt above practically invites them to view the videos), revealing that there are readerly pleasures and writerly investments in constructing Meghan as an 'unruly woman.' Anne Helen Petersen appropriates Kathleen Rowe's use of this concept (1995), referring to 'women who, in some way, step outside the boundaries of good womanhood, who end up being labeled too fat, too loud, too slutty, too whatever characteristic women are meant to keep under control' (Petersen 2017, xi).

These incidents of casting doubt on Meghan's character, even on her version of herself, are not communicated in a sustained way, but interspersed throughout the text. The effect is that of creating little wrinkles which disturb the otherwise 'smoothed out,' positive biographical portrayal. They also broadly correspond to Morton's assessment of Meghan's impact on the monarchy: largely optimistic, but with some cautionary notes. However, these cautionary notes grow more serious, less reassuring, as the text concludes, by which point it bears the weight of the accumulated little wrinkles of negative character assessment. Morton opens his text by stating that Meghan's marriage 'will make the monarchy seem more inclusive and relevant in an ever-changing world' and argues that 'it shows how much and how far the royal family – and the British nation – have changed and evolved during the reign of Queen



Elizabeth II' (2). He concludes by re-stating these ideas, implying that the intervening story of Meghan's life has had no effect on his optimism. But the conclusion tempers this confidence:

This California girl may inwardly wince at the idea of bending the knee, and may miss all those opportunities to take stylised selfies and rage at the near impossibility of finding a ripe avocado or a decent hot yoga studio in central London, but she will survive and thrive. (275)

At this point, despite having effectively attributed many positive qualities to Meghan, such as ambition, work ethic, and integrity, some readers might feel *less* convinced that she is an appropriate addition to the royal family than they did at the beginning. Above, Morton focuses on details which construct Meghan as superficial, and (more threateningly) as a woman who may be unwilling to perform royal protocols. The 'inwardly wince' suggests that she can be read as either polite, or fake. If she is only performing protocols, then she may not subscribe to the values of the royal family as institution. The reference to 'this' California girl moves away from caricature to personalise the description; these are Meghan's traits, there are other California girls who may be more deferential. The supposedly reassuring claim that she will 'survive and thrive' mocks her Californian-ness. It also contributes to Morton's claim that Meghan is not vulnerable (and this is not entirely praiseworthy). All of this may constitute a further attempt to undermine Meghan's self-representation. The *Vanity Fair* interview quotes her blog: 'I was born and raised in Los Angeles, a California girl who lives by the ethos that most things can be cured with either yoga, the beach, or a few avocados' (92). Whereas Meghan refers to yoga, the beach and avocados as indicators of her upbeat demeanour, and is proud of her Californian identity, Morton uses these items to underscore her difference, and make her a target for mockery.

Morton's strategy of incorporating insinuations works to manage and construct Meghan's biracial identity as the greatest wrinkle of all: disruptive in a negative sense, something which marks her as a problem. Morton takes two approaches here. Firstly, he discusses Meghan's biracial identity to ensure that it is 'smoothed out,' not a problem (in effect trying to resolve a 'problem' manufactured by the text's own construction of it as such). He does this partly by shifting his focus to foreground her identity as 'American,' and arguing in the book's closing pages that it is class, not race, which really makes an individual an outsider in the royal family. Yet even when Morton is not discussing race, it is present. His second strategy is to argue that being biracial is central to *all* Meghan's qualities, positive and negative. This enables him to conduct an exercise in seemingly 'smoothing out' the topic of race, while preserving an understanding of her biracial identity as wrinkle, as problem.

Morton's representation of Meghan's life story opens by foregrounding concerns about identity (indeed they are central to Meghan's conception of herself in her *Elle* essay): 'For years she was troubled by a nagging question at the back of her mind: where does my family come from, what is my history?' (9). Being biracial is positioned as the key (the only?) determining factor in her identity, prompting a prolonged and profound existential crisis of belonging. The biography aligns Meghan's grappling with her identity with the tropes of American self-fashioning and pursuit of the American Dream. Being biracial is positioned by Morton as explaining all Meghan's positive qualities, determining her values and ethos. He claims that 'Meghan's struggle to understand herself instinctively made her more aware of those who had difficulties fitting in' (38), connecting being biracial with her strong sense of right and wrong, particularly in relation to race and gender (38-39). But his positive comments on this topic, as elsewhere, can be double-edged. He makes the strange claim that 'while Meghan was not the only girl on campus with divorced parents, what marked her out was the way she had managed them. Like many children of divorced parents, she had learned to become a skilled diplomat, mediating between the warring parties'(55). Meghan's biracial identity is key but implicit here; the 'warring parties' are her white father and African American mother. The foreshadowing in use of the term 'diplomat' speaks to her later study of politics at university, and her activism, suggesting that he credits being biracial with providing her with skills to thrive in her adult life, one marked by travel and humanitarian work, all of which require her to negotiate different communities, countries and professions. Implicitly, perhaps, Morton is making the case for Meghan's inclusion in the royal family and reassuring readers that that these qualities ensure she will succeed there too. The suggestion that Meghan can belong anywhere, a kind of Everyperson, is similar to the way Barack Obama was often discussed before and after his successful campaign to become President of the United States; as someone whose mixed-race identity enabled him to connect to all Americans. Indeed, Obama describes himself this way in his famous "A More Perfect Union" speech (Obama, 2004). In both cases such constructions are problematic, because they smooth out the specifics of individual histories, and construct Meghan and Obama as universal symbols transcending race. It is also likely that symbols of 'transcending' race are largely designed to appeal to, or are rooted in, whiteness, precisely because of the ease with which these can be read as postracial: 'received meanings of the term generally signify a repudiation of racial discrimination and racism, indeed of racial categories themselves as meaningful' (Banet Weiser et al., 1). And so, like the concept of 'postracism' engendered by representations of Obama and his presidency (Banet Weiser et al., 2019, 7), Morton's symbolisation of Meghan -

as-Everyperson is not transcendent at all. It relies on her biracial identity in the act of making her identity universal; its blithe disregard of the particulars of raced identity is rooted in the privilege of whiteness as default and norm.

It is crucial to recall, too, that Morton also describes Meghan as a ‘networker’ in a negative way; it is no compliment when he describes her as such in the context of old friends feeling abandoned (122). Her networking skills are invoked to imply that she uses people. Morton also describes how Meghan is able to function as a ‘fly on the wall’ (72), privy to racist remarks which people would not make in her presence if they knew that she was mixed race, a situation enabled by her skin colour. While Morton notes only that such incidents allow Meghan to learn how others think about her identity (72), the ‘fly on the wall’ trope has the disturbing effect of constructing Meghan herself as worthy of suspicion, not as she appears (this is resonant with his claim that she may ‘inwardly wince’ at following royal protocols; she may perform belonging to an institution she does not endorse). Not only is this unlikely to reassure readers about Meghan as a suitable partner for Prince Harry, such comments seem embedded in racist assumptions about the mixed-race individual (especially one who appears, to others, to ‘pass’) as deceptive.

Morton dispenses with Meghan’s crisis of identity following description of how she makes two close friends at university, an African American young man and a Jewish young woman. He claims:

Meghan’s two closest friends represented the duality of her heritage: the iconoclastic, eccentric and independent African American and the white professional. Their presence helped her to explore and integrate these sides of her personality, absorbing and synthesising as she grew into her own identity (76).

There are a number of ways in which this is reductive and offensive. Meghan’s Jewish friend becomes ‘white,’ a questionable elision which allows Morton to set up a dubious correspondence between her friends and her biracial heritage. It is a correspondence which understands Meghan as somehow living with ‘white’ and ‘African American’ sides of herself which she struggles to reconcile, even as it still attempts to position her as the Obama-esque container of multitudes (the Jewish friend). This description also anticipates Morton’s most explicitly critical discussion of her; she uses people then discards them. Here, she chooses friends who allow her to continue to explore the question of who she is. The two ‘sides’ of Meghan’s identity are not equal but constructed along a hierarchy of long-established racist oppositions, constructed along the binaries of order and disorder; the ‘professional’ white friend and the ‘eccentric’ African American. The implication is that those ‘sides’ cannot be

reconciled because they cannot overlap; describing Markle's 'white' friend as 'professional' also implies that this descriptor is in contrast to, or not available to describe, her African American friend.

The statement above is offered by Morton as a profound insight and a moment of resolution: Meghan's ideological contradictions are smoothed out, she knows who she is. This statement does not even comprise the conclusion of a chapter or a section, but nonetheless reads as if Morton is having the last word on the subject. Although he does not use the term 'postracial,' Morton's final explicit discussion of Meghan's quest to understand her identity resonates with the definition cited earlier. The effect of having designated Meghan as having 'reconciled' the 'sides' of her identity is that they, race, and racism, do not need to be talked about much any more. Indeed, he moves on, describing her trials in finding major acting roles, eventual success in *Suits*, and her increasingly high-profile celebrity status. After she meets Harry, there is barely even a focus on Meghan herself. Morton does discuss the difficulties Meghan's mixed-race identity poses for casting (88), racism in some media reporting about Meghan and her engagement (208), and acknowledges racism within the royal family (252), but the distinct impression is that he is much more comfortable *not* talking about this. By the end of his biography, Meghan is reduced to a minor character in her own life story, in line with the gendered 'happy ever after' of fairytale which suggests that a woman's life is over when she finds happiness in marriage. She becomes a symbol rather than a person. By the end of the text he focuses on her identity as 'American' and argues that class is the greatest marker of difference in relation to the royal family (272). He notes that Meghan will need to learn British ways: she will 'discover that irony is not a device with which to press your designer shirts' (276). Terrible pun aside, Morton too is smoothing out (pressing) Meghan's identity, making her more acceptable by not focusing on race, and yet simultaneously preserving her as a disruptive wrinkle (construed negatively), someone who does not belong (she is not British).

Morton concludes by claiming that 'her presence inside the royal family is a challenge and an opportunity', with the potential to 'make the monarchy seem more inclusive and relevant to multicultural Britain, even as the nation struggles to come to terms with diversity in a post-Brexit world' (276). Morton chooses not to state it, but the inverse of all his positive claims is clearly present; if Meghan is understood primarily as a 'challenge,' rather than an 'opportunity' this will reveal something about how inclusive the royal family and the nation are. The question of whether 'the struggle with diversity' in the UK might make life difficult for Meghan is not discussed (one troubling consequence of Morton denying her vulnerability

is the implication that she cannot be hurt). Reading this biography in the wake of the royal wedding and the often negative UK press attention Meghan has received since, culminating in her and her husband announcing in January 2020 that they would withdraw from their roles as senior members of the royal family, it seems that Morton's optimistic forecast of attitudes towards her reception into the royal family is either naive, or – to the extent that his insinuations work to tell a story marked by something other than optimism – correct.

### Meghan writes Meghan

Meghan's 2015 *Elle* essay, "Meghan Markle: I'm more Than An 'Other,'" and her guest edited issue of *British Vogue* (2019), were written and published before and after her royal wedding, and for predominantly US and UK readers respectively. Both texts resist the transformation of herself into a symbol, and (relatedly) the happy ever after which forecloses the possibilities of development in a woman's life. They can be understood as documenting Meghan's experiments in 'living a feminist life,' (Ahmed, 2017). This is especially as they resist the construction of herself as a 'stranger,' a figure Ahmed identifies as 'one who is recognised as out of place, as the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as a crime or threat' (Ahmed, 2017, 33) – whereas Morton's biographical role as mediator is premised on and invested in perceiving her as such. It is worth noting that Ahmed describes the additional figure of the feminist killjoy as someone who does not engage in 'smoothing things over' (195). If Morton understands Meghan's biracial identity as a 'wrinkle' in a negative sense, Meghan understands that identity as a wrinkle from a feminist, intersectional perspective.

A key to Meghan's attitude is given in the *Vanity Fair* interview, in which she notes (it seems, regrettably) that photo shoots would almost always 'airbrush out' her freckles' (155). The airbrushing out is presumably driven by the impulse which encourages getting rid of wrinkles; the assumption is that a smooth, unmarked face is most aesthetically appealing. The desire to remove freckles (usually brown patches of skin) may also speak to the racist constructions underpinning the fact that white faces have historically been viewed as more beautiful. Meghan's pleasure in having her freckles displayed means that she has a sense of her own distinctiveness and wishes to preserve it. It also speaks to a tendency towards disclosure. This is clear in the *Elle* essay, which is notable for Meghan's resistance towards occupying the 'grey area' created 'when your ethnicity is black and white' (Markle, 2015) She notes that 'being biracial paints a blurred line that is equal parts staggering and illuminating' (it is tempting to suggest that this describes how a wrinkle might mark an individual's history). Meghan gives as examples her refusal to tick boxes which require her to identify as something

which does not fully express who she is. It is vital to note that this does *not* mean that Meghan takes up a postracial position; she stresses the importance of continually acknowledging all of her heritage. She concludes by discussing the relative who chooses his own name, the excerpt discussed above. In Meghan's essay her ancestor's act allows her to identify a connection with her African American relative and write both their lives into a story of American self-fashioning, something which additionally suggests that she refuses to define herself wholly in terms of white constructions of identity and belonging. It is not a risk-free claim; the gesture of writing herself and her ancestor into canonical narratives of American identity formation risks confirming, for some, Sika Elaine Dagbovie's claim that 'for mixed-race celebrities [. . .] blackness is deemed acceptable only when it upholds stereotypical white preconceptions and desires' (Dagbovie 2007, 217).

Nonetheless, Meghan's self-representation is very different from Morton's strategy of focusing on her Americanness as a means of deflecting from race. For Meghan, the ability to choose who she is and resist the categories society might put her in signifies her embrace of her biracial identity. It allows her to particularly emphasise her African American heritage, and underscores her Americanness. This is surely implicit when she notes that neither does she consider herself an 'Other' (another identity category she refuses). Morton, on the other hand, continuously constructs Meghan as 'other,' whether he focuses on her as biracial or American – someone who needs to be rendered intelligible to others through his mediation. Meghan does allude to the fact that she has not always felt confident and triumphant about her identity. Discussing unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore, she claims that while American culture 'has perhaps only placed bandages over the problems that have never healed at the root,' she has 'healed from the base.' This not only acknowledges that there has been pain and difficulty in negotiating her biracial identity (a reminder that her existence is 'staggering and illuminating'), but indicates that she does not position herself as an Obama-esque abstract symbol of multicultural America. Her story of embracing her own identity is an important counter to Morton's text not simply because it constitutes her description, in her own words; it is empowered, ultimately choosing to focus on the 'illuminating' aspects of being mixed race, but not smoothing away the contradictions of her experience.

The *British Vogue* issue embraces and extends this self-representation beyond a focus on Meghan herself. It develops her sense of ownership over her identity to comment more widely on belonging, inclusivity and tolerance, with a particular focus on race and gender; the issue is about 'the power of the collective' (Markle, 2019, 84). That this is the British strand of *Vogue* testifies to Meghan's new life within the royal family, but builds on her prior interests

in equality, wellbeing and fashion. While the issue appeals to British audiences primarily, its focus is better described as transnational, so that here Meghan arguably more closely approaches representing herself as an Obama-esque Everyperson symbol. Meghan is not overly visible in the issue – there are few images of her, for example – but her editor’s letter suggests that she endorses everything it contains. She is keen to emphasise the decisions and control she has exerted over the final product, but makes a ‘caveat’ about how she cannot control everything: ‘this is a magazine. It’s a business, after all. I share that to manage expectations for you: there will be advertising sections that are requisite for every issue, so while I feel confident that you’ll feel my thumbprint on most pages, please know that there were elements that just came with the territory’ (84). While Meghan does not define the ‘elements,’ the reference to advertising, for example, may acknowledge that many women cannot afford the goods and lifestyles described in its pages. The reference to her ‘thumbprint’ nonetheless suggests that she conceives of her own identity as functioning as the seal of approval or endorsement of the issue. The empowered women on the front cover, the interviews and article topics within all reflect her interests and concerns – Prince Harry’s interview with Dr Jane Goodall discusses unconscious bias and racism (183), for example, while Jameela Jamil’s article on body image discusses race (197).

The issue is, ultimately, testament to many positive aspects of Meghan herself. Her editor’s letter mentions her commitments to ethical and sustainable brands, and wellbeing (84). She notes how she worked on the issue while pregnant, talks warmly about the (then-)anticipated birth, and conducts a questionnaire-style interview with Michelle Obama (all this indicates that she is serious, caring, and functions as an index of her celebrity status). The female bodies on the cover and within reflect a variety of body types and skin colours, reflecting her commitment to gender and racial equality, tolerance, and inclusiveness. While it does risk promoting models of lifestyle to which many women cannot aspire, and a neoliberal vision that women can consume their way to empowerment, Meghan uses the issue to mediate on her own behalf – maintaining and amplifying her biracial identity and its associations with inclusivity.

### The wrinkle as shattering and illuminating

The ‘wrinkle’ reference in the *Vanity Fair* interview *may* be indicative of a wider tendency in mainstream media to make Meghan acceptable and unthreatening to (presumed) largely white

and conservative publics, by trivialising the question of race or foregrounding another aspect of her identity, age or Americanness, either to 'manage' her mixed-race identity or ignore it altogether. This can work more and less benignly depending on how writers and commentators want to manage her 'ideological contradictions' in order to tell particular stories about Meghan. Morton's attempts to 'smooth out' thinking about race and Meghan constitute a major disservice either by minimising complexity and importance (airbrushing out the wrinkle), or by its paradoxically persistent construction of her as disruptive stranger (preserving the wrinkle for disapproving judgment).

This analysis demonstrates that efforts to manage an individual's identity by employing different aspects of her identity in order to explain (or explain away) others need to be examined on their own terms for the work they are doing (what values are being endorsed or denied). These efforts may not be intrinsically positive or negative in themselves, (though it is highly likely that they will be problematic). While my readings have been grounded in how age is used to discuss Meghan's biracial identity, my examples show that other aspects of her identity, such as nationality, are also invoked to manage the 'new wrinkle' of biracial identity. This may indicate that Meghan's 'star text' is still in the process of being formed, or that it is particularly flexible, and / or resistant to efforts at fixing it. This is perhaps even more so the case after her resignation, with Harry, from the British monarchy, and as Meghan's public persona continues to develop. Perhaps ultimately, the representations of Meghan discussed here reveal both the strengths and limitations of using intersectionality as an 'analytic tool' (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016, 2). At their least helpful, such 'smoothing out' exercises obscure and maintain structural power relations, and compartmentalise identity rather than understanding categories like age, gender and race in relation. At their best, as in Meghan's article, these exercises can stand as hopeful examples that writing itself can be a form of intersectionality as praxis (32), which can illuminate new ways of thinking about and writing identity, and suggest ways of resisting narrow and reductive representations, in favour of those more just and equitable.

## Notes

1. I have chosen to use the term 'biracial' rather than 'mixed-race' to describe Meghan, as it is the term she uses most frequently in her 2015 *Elle* essay.



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