I Never Liked Buckingham Palace. But It's Somebody's Shrine.

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"Ding dong the witch is dead," my phone buzzed not even five minutes after BBC journalist Huw Edwards, donning black suit and tie, solemnly announced the passing of Queen Elizabeth II to 11 million Britons. I swiftly replied with a screenshot of the newest hashtag trending on Twitter: #Kohinoor, the 100 carat diamond once a proud possession of India now set in the late Queen's crown. My reply was crass, seizing the grief-stricken moment to poke fun at what I deemed yet another crime of the crown, but I soon found myself scrolling through Tweets with a profoundly different tone. Expectedly, Britons young and old were mourning the death of their Queen Mother; it was the Americans who shared their sentiment that caught my disapproving glance. The United States famously fought its own bloody war in pursuit of independence from colonial rule, so why have its citizens reneged on their predecessors' rejection of monarchy? With the advent of the internet, fan culture has only intensified and expanded, unphased by whatever sacred line separates the royals from commoners across the pond. The untouchables of empires past live behind millions of screens today, and I want to know if anyone's made it to the other side.

Prince Harry's decision to marry American actress, now Duchess, Meghan Markle reignited interest in the affairs of the royal family overnight, especially among American admirers. At the peak of the hype in 2018, Kate Samuelson of *Time* magazine interviewed three such admirers who traveled to England for a chance to witness the Windsor Castle wedding. I was particularly struck by the rationale Minnesota native Kristen Meinzer provided justifying her

slight obsession with the royal family. Raised by her anglophilic mother and grandmother in the 1980s, Meinzer recalls watching King Charles' wedding to Diana Spencer as "the first wedding [she] was ever aware of outside of Disney fairy tales" and becoming entranced by royal traditions, perhaps contributing to her romanticization of the family as a whole (Meinzer qtd. In Samuelson). Most surprising, however, is that she sees a place for women of color like herself and Markle within those traditions and even praises the family for ushering in a new era of progress. As someone intimately familiar with the legacy of British imperialism, I have always viewed the monarchy as complicit in white supremacy at best and perpetrators at worst, so to hear another Asian American exalt the widening inclusivity of this historically exclusive group was certainly a shock. The royal family may or may not be capable of inviting racial tolerance into British high society, but it seems to replenish hope at the human level of the movement.

Samuelson also interviewed fashion designer Kristin Contino and royal lifestyle blogger Christine Ross, who, like Meinzer, pointed to the late Princess Diana as the source of their fascination with sophistication. The glamor of Diana was such that it left an indelible impression on a generation of young girls to treat the underserved with kindness and conduct themselves with the grace of a princess. Not only that, she held special appeal to marginalized groups and those outcasted by society, from her campaign to prove AIDS patients were deserving of physical touch to advocating for disabled and deformed landmine victims ("Charitable Work"). Because Diana so closely associated her service to the people with her royal identity, she nurtured fans who felt a deep connection to her, her struggles, and the family she endured. There was a time when the royal family and its favor was reserved only to members of an elite class, and Diana, while bearing an aristocratic name, upended this conception by embracing her designation as an "outsider." Truly, it is natural that so many children raised in a period of great

socio-political reckoning grew up to idolize a woman in a privileged position who leveraged it to amplify the voices of those without. Furthermore, she shattered the norm for women of high society by filing for divorce then appearing publicly in what popular media branded as the "revenge dress," a short black dress extremely unlike the flowing white gowns of royalty. Though she actually wore the dress no more than a couple of hours, it came to symbolize a new wave of female liberation (Amoako). The post-breakup fashion of a single royal had been plastered across countless tabloids and cycled endlessly through boxy televisions, and close analysis quickly followed. With such a massive yet scattered audience receiving constant commentary on the family's private affairs, one can hardly condemn the viewer for developing a long-term dependency on royal drama.

Whenever American emotional investment on royal drama spikes, as it did following the 2011 wedding of Prince William and Duchess Kate Middleton, media attention immediately responds. Fascination and even obsession with the royal family is more broadly reflected in the phenomenon of anglophilia, or an unusual partiality to England and its culture. The media landscape of the early 2010s saw a surge in anglophilic content that persists today, dominated by critically acclaimed and cult series about aristocratic English families like *Downton Abbey*, *Bridgerton*, and the aptly named *The Crown* (Stack). Beneath these money-making productions, there exists an entire subculture dedicated to humanizing these silver screen demigods, from doting on the Queen for her humorous remarks while attempting to cut a birthday cake to photoshopped collages of her corgis. Less innocuous are the various gossip forums debating whether Markle is a proper fit for the family, with of course the occasional racial slur or microaggression tossed in. The media introduced a drug in the form of royal fanaticism and there is no shortage of users.

That is not to say this fanaticism was manufactured by the media, rather it plays a major contributing factor, or that humans aren't simply drawn to fantasies of royal grandeur. Initially, I was perplexed as to how Americans could reconcile their troubled past as a British colony with their newfound anglophilia, but neglected to consider that this shared past might be a gateway to colonial nostalgia instead of an obstacle. Americans belonging to the dominant group in their country, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, can eventually trace their roots to a common ancestry and culture with Britons, however fraught the history in the interim may be. Due to this sensitive but time-weathered bond, initiated by none other than the British monarchy, Americans have been able to enjoy a special relationship with the British, and vice versa (Stack). I remember the day the Queen died, every last flag in the capital city of DC flew at half mast, including that of my own university. To mourn the death of a foreign leader signals a deep respect, but to mourn the death of another nation's mother signifies kinship.

Global politics may be an unlikely source for fan culture, but the intersection is strikingly evident in how the special relationship shared between the United States and Britain has affected perceptions of the royal family. As early as the Gilded Age, wealthy American families adopted a custom of sending their daughters across the Atlantic hoping that they would attain higher status domestically by marrying into an aristocratic house (Malone). Where the U.S. was a fledgling nation whose prominent figures included savvy businessmen and glamorous actors, the blue-blooded elite of Britain offered the familiar element of celebrity combined with the prestige of a storied legacy. This wave of Anglophilia returned at the end of the 20th century when the U.S. underwent a sort of racial reckoning demanding reform of oppressive structures and reflection on implicit biases. Americans found solace in the homogeneity of British society built on an Empire that maintained a polite degree of separation from its atrocities, unlike the U.S.

where the aftermath of slavery and racial segregation was increasingly discussed. Interestingly, President Reagan revitalized the special relationship with fellow conserative Prime Minister Thatcher during this period, recognizing their citizens' desire for Anglo-Saxon unity (Burton 360). The phenomenon of Americans from varying ethnic backgrounds retreating to a culturally-based fantasy of their British past, and by extension idolization of the royal family, in times of political instability is so prominent that it was even noted by President Obama. During a White House visit from Prince Charles he remarked, "[The American people] like [the royal family] much more than they like their own politicians (Obama qtd. in Stack)."

Arguably more than a form of political escapism, Americans also identify a certain sense of stability in the royal family, which has persevered in nearly the exact same manner since the very inception of our country. I cannot recall the sheer number of times I scrolled past some patronizing iteration of "Be respectful, the Queen's been there forever. The world just got more confusing," an argument which does possess an unexpected sliver of merit. The 20th century saw rapid industrialization, social progress, and various catastrophes, all witnessed by a figure who herself remained constant.To many Americans, her presence is understandably comforting, they simply reap the benefit of her gentle words and steady hand. But why do working class Britons, still forced to pay taxes to the crown, share this sentiment and what does it reveal about the crosscultural sympathy for monarchs? Once again, the answer lies in colonial nostalgia, closely tied to a longing for when their white identity was enough to sustain themselves under the watchful eye of the Empire while it pillaged foreign lands to nurture the homeland. Although white Britons did not actively and currently do not benefit from the monarchy, it represents a time when the stability of their positions were guaranteed (Russo et al.). Similarly, Americans are not directly impacted by whether the Queen lives or dies, but her passing signifies the end of

a colonial era where life was more convenient for a select few. When privilege is revoked, the mundane becomes suffering.

On a personal level, I have always found it massively easier to understand and even justify the argument of my opponent than to sympathize with it. To me, to sympathize with the royal family and its fans would be to forgive genocide and famine spanning the Global South, economic depletion and political unrest in former colonies, and exploitation of British taxpayers today. But that is not to say I felt nothing when the Queen died. I didn't feel the rage or relief that echoed among some groups of people of color, rather I was struck by the somber atmosphere that immediately took hold over my coffee shop and realized a cultural shift had just occurred. For a moment, I mourned the silliness of editing mustaches on the Queen and rap songs played over clips of her parachuting into the 2012 London Olympics and prepared myself for the barrage of white text on black screens that would flood social media in the coming week. I couldn't exactly blame these people because, as I can better articulate in light of my research, Americans need the royal family. They need them to supply entertainment through a veil of privacy, validate their identities, and offer an enticing illusion that can only exist in a peaceful world. And like Kristen Meinzer, they need to know they belong.

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