

‘I wanted to offer  
my sympathy ...  
woman to woman’:  
Reading *The Crown*  
during a conjuncture  
of crisis

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What can *The Crown*’s portrayal of the Queen  
and Thatcher tell us about gender, care, class and  
imperial power?

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In November 2020, the UK entered further lockdown restrictions to stem the Covid-19 pandemic. Prime Minister Boris Johnson called for the nation to ‘beat back this virus’ and ‘reclaim our lives’.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, earlier in the year, Queen Elizabeth II had invoked ‘the Blitz spirit’ in an address to the nation, calling on citizens to have ‘quiet, good-humoured resolve’ and practise self-discipline to withstand the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> This type of royal address had not occurred since World War II.

As *The Care Collective* and others argue, the pandemic exposed a ‘crisis of

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care’ in the UK and globally.<sup>3</sup> With schools closed and many working from home, people were faced with the ‘double burden’ of childcare, domestic care, other caring responsibilities *and* paid work. Women specifically felt this burden, with studies finding increasing gender inequalities due to the pandemic, which were further accelerating a wider ‘crisis in neoliberal social reproduction’.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic emphasised divisions based on class, gender and race, at a time when, as lockdown restrictions tightened, visible symbols of privilege (such as having a garden) were becoming ever more noticeable.

This was the moment when the latest season of Netflix’s *The Crown* - with the Queen and the royal family at centre stage - became a UK hit. The season was watched by 73 million households after its release in November 2020, echoing a broader explosion in on-demand streaming television throughout the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The show’s fourth season (which focuses on the 1970s and 1980s) plays with voyeuristic displays of spectacular wealth, and is centred around intimacies between three well-known female figures: Margaret Thatcher, the Queen and Princess Diana.

These three women’s lives and careers have long been the subject of both celebration and demonisation in public commentary, but all of them, in different ways, have been generally positioned as strong, and - particularly in the cases of the Queen and Thatcher - as imperious, even ruthless. *The Crown*, however, paints a more vulnerable and sympathetic picture of these two women, offering audiences promises of intimate cinematic pleasure through the tales of family, love, obligation and rivalry that frame the historical events it portrays. Whilst elsewhere it is the representation of Diana that has received the most media attention, here we argue that it is the dynamics between the Queen and Thatcher - with Diana as counterpoint - that is most telling, and which the series oscillates around.<sup>6</sup> The representation of these three figureheads, rather than offering ‘real’ depictions of their personalities and life stories, reveals much about current cultural narratives of femininities - and of home, work, class and race. Historical dramas which gain popularity in moments of crisis often reveal more about the present than they do about the past.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the show, the Queen is portrayed as the guardian of moral responsibility and the mother of the nation/British Empire, while Thatcher is shown to push forward neoliberalism and free market ideologies. But ultimately these representations have very similar undertones. Through its oppositional

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representation of the Queen and Thatcher, the show raises contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, gender and the aristocratic imperial state - but only to then empty its critique of any political potential by redirecting and refocusing viewers' attention on to these individual women, their families and the home.

## **'Two menopausal women. That'll be a smooth ride'**

*The Crown* frames the Queen and Thatcher in terms of domestic intimacy from the outset. In the opening episode, 'Gold Stick', Thatcher is introduced as she gets ready at home waiting for the 1979 election outcome. She tweaks her hair, spritzes perfume and rehearses the line, 'We are *very* confident', as news commentary describes her 'remarkable stamina'. She leaves her house to hordes of reporters as the scene transitions to the Queen watching Thatcher on television. Subsequently, the two women meet in the Buckingham Palace audience room, where the monarch and prime minister traditionally meet weekly, and Thatcher curtseys. A medium long shot depicts the power relations between them, but then they sit in their respective seats, in a similar pose and blue suits, presumably to represent the Conservative Party and royal 'blue' blood, suggesting that these are similarly powerful, strong women. The Queen briefly inquires after Thatcher's family, and these questions are rebuffed as Thatcher emphasises work. They discuss the merits of female leadership; Thatcher states that women are 'too emotional' and the Queen retorts that Thatcher will not have that problem with her. The scene cuts to Thatcher ironing her husband Denis's shirt at home while telling him about the Queen's work ethic.

This introduction positions these two women with pivotal roles in public life as primarily linked by their domestic and aesthetic labour: the settings, clothing, work and preparation to meet and greet others. Both women are depicted through quite traditional forms of middle-class femininity. Yet, they are also shown to have a strong work ethic and 'grit'. This connects to what Kim Allen and Anna Bull have termed the 'turn to character' across political and cultural realms: how character traits are 'mobilised to meet a variety of agendas and interests' in neoliberal times.<sup>8</sup> The series, therefore, immediately raises questions about both character and the gendered negotiations of the care/work divide - the successful management of which has been relentlessly positioned as the responsibility of women. As the series continues, these women are often sympathetically shown to fail, in different ways, at negotiating this divide.

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A recurring theme, for example, is the question of whether Thatcher and the Queen can be/are ‘good’ mothers while ruling the country. Diana becomes important here as the ‘ultimate’ selfless mother, targeted by the royal family as a suitable wife for Prince Charles.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the series, Diana refuses to put the monarchy before her children’s needs; she is the ‘good’ mother counterpoint to the Queen and Thatcher. One episode, ‘Favourites’, questions if the Queen and Thatcher have favourite children. Thatcher’s son, Mark, disappears in the Sahara. When discussing this with the Queen during the weekly audience, Thatcher has no qualms in stating that Mark is her favourite child, and the Queen, shocked at Thatcher’s boldness, denies that she has a favourite. The idea that mothers should not have favourites reverberates against the ideal that mothers should offer their children equal love and care. Not doing so is a failure of the ‘good’ mother, a challenge to the myth that mothers love unconditionally and equally.<sup>10</sup>

The Queen meets her children to decide whether she has a favourite, and in the process discovers she is unaware of the intricacies of their lives. As the episode progresses, the Queen watches Thatcher on television announcing Mark’s rescue, and stating: ‘you are all used to thinking of me as Prime Minister. But what the last few days has shown me very clearly is that, above all else, I am a mother’. This frames Thatcher in terms of the work/home balance, and as starkly opposed with the Queen. As the episode ends, the Queen tells Philip that their children are ‘lost’, but that her mother has reassured her that she is ‘already mother to the nation’. Philip comforts her; she is a ‘good mother’, but it is her job to ‘stick around, stay alive and keep breathing’ for the nation. Thus, while the Queen ‘fails’ at the work/home balance, this is mitigated through broader ideologies of monarchism. She may not ‘successfully’ mother her children, but she succeeds as grand/mother to Britain and the Commonwealth. This larger project moralises her mothering role through ideologies of sacrifice and duty, symbolising care.

These themes had some salience in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, where we saw parents (predominantly mothers) struggling to balance the roles of employees, teachers, mothers, carers and housewives. Such change forced women to re-evaluate the work/home balance, while being addressed in media and public culture as sacrificing their own lives for the ‘greater good’.<sup>11</sup> Thatcher and the Queen’s mothering dilemmas echoed the challenges faced by viewers, whilst continuing to emphatically position parenting as women’s work.

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While Thatcher appears to eventually, if problematically, succeed at the work/home balance, she is depicted as failing when it comes to attaining the necessary cultural attributes of upper-class privilege. Thatcher is represented as a working-class girl who overcame humble beginnings as a greengrocer's daughter to attend Oxford University and become prime minister. But such social mobility appears costly. In 'The Balmoral Test' episode, Thatcher and Diana visit Balmoral Castle. Thatcher and Denis are shown as not having the cultural capital to pass 'the test' and fit in with the upper classes. Among many incidents, they tip the household staff too early, and confuse drinks with formal dinner, arriving too early dressed in Black Tie; Thatcher also fails to bring outdoor shoes for country activities, and the couple leave early so Thatcher can attend to state business. While Thatcher doesn't 'want to catch any upper-class habits', she nonetheless is shown to fail. The familiar 'rags to riches' story that often characterises Thatcher in public and media discourse, and in parts of the show, is celebrated, but it is also complicated, as Thatcher's work ethic simultaneously positions her as a damaged workaholic who must negotiate various - care, work and class - demands.

Contrastingly, the royals and Diana demonstrate successful balancing of work and family time. Aristocratic Diana knows the upper-class rules and aces the 'Balmoral test': she brings the correct shoes, charms at dinner and is quietly instrumental in hunting the stag. Diana can also cherry-pick domestic work in ways Thatcher cannot, emphasising Diana's 'ordinariness'. Diana has class privilege, enabling her to *choose* domestic labour as a cleaner, a job discussed at length when Philip and Diana hunt the stag. Meanwhile, Thatcher's forms of labour (from being prime minister to domesticity) are integral to her character, and are always already precarious. Writing about British representations of the Middletons during the early years of Prince William and Kate Middleton's relationship, Steph Lawler argues that Kate's mother showed 'sufficient "enterprise" to have escaped' her working-class origins through 'hard work', but her status was precarious as she was depicted as too *déclassé* for the royal family (for example, chewing gum at RMA Sandhurst).<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Thatcher's class mobility is largely celebrated, but collapses when she attempts to 'pass' in royal circles, and the audience is asked to feel compassion for this failure.

This series of *The Crown* does make some pointed remarks, and at times it offers sympathetic and sentimental portrayals about the difficulties of juggling care and

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work within a patriarchal society, as well as the complexities around how class and belonging play out within the exclusionary nature of the monarchy. In its intimate characterisation of the historical figures of the Queen and Thatcher the show opens up the potential for critique. But ultimately these representations uphold middle-upper class distinctions and encourage selective ideas of meritocracy as the key to social mobility;<sup>13</sup> and they maintain ideologies that women should be primary carers and parents. This kind of ideological move has occurred in other television genres, for example in reality television and period dramas, and feminist scholars have explored this move for some time.<sup>14</sup>

### ‘What of our moral economy?’

Thatcher and the Queen’s ideological stances are again contrasted in the episode ‘Fagan’. Loosely based on real-life events, in this episode Michael Fagan breaks into Buckingham Palace and enters the Queen’s bedroom.<sup>15</sup> Throughout, the episode plays with class inequalities, visually contrasting Fagan’s London council flat with Buckingham Palace. While Fagan queues for his Supplementary Benefit payment, Buckingham Palace hosts its summer garden party, and invited guests queue to shake royal hands: a contrast that depicts royal class privilege and the meritocratic myth, as meeting the royals is a ‘reward’ for performing appropriate neoliberal personhood. The episode underscores Fagan’s disillusionment with the neoliberal politics of Thatcherism, which had cost him his job and his family.

When Fagan enters the Queen’s bedroom, he announces ‘I just want to tell you what’s going on in the country’. He describes his desperation, asking the Queen to ‘save us all from her’ [read: Thatcher]. He had tried everything else, he continued, from writing letters to speaking to his MP - the Queen was his ‘last resort’ as Head of State. This directly contrasts the Queen with Thatcher: while Thatcher has destroyed the welfare state and eroded support, the Queen is depicted as the saviour - the only one to listen. Indeed, Fagan calls his journey a ‘mirage of democracy’; the Queen presents an opportunity to be heard, even though hereditary monarchy directly counteracts democracy. When they shake hands before Fagan’s arrest, he symbolically becomes the child of the nation, devastated by Thatcherism but potentially healed through the Queen’s divine royal touch. This scene draws on historic narratives of self-serving politicians versus the paternalistic monarch, who ‘rises above’ politics and sides with ‘the people’.

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Later, the Queen and Thatcher discuss Fagan at the weekly audience. While Thatcher apologises for the ‘national embarrassment’ caused by this ‘trouble-maker’, the Queen retaliates that Fagan is blameless. Rather, he is ‘a victim of unemployment’, citing significant increases in unemployment figures. Thatcher responds: ‘if unemployment is temporarily high it is the necessary side effect of the medicine we are administering to the British economy’. The Queen then asks: ‘what of our moral economy?’ Thatcher replies with logics rooted in neoliberal individualism - from the meritocratic supposition that everyone has ‘it within them’ to succeed, to her notorious quote (taken out of context, but repurposed here) that there are no collective communities, ‘there are individual men and women and there are families’. Thatcher embodies her flagship neoliberal policies, while the Queen is seen as their antithesis, as she calls for more collective policies reflecting the needs of the most vulnerable.

In the context of the pandemic and lockdown, these representations do significant cultural work: models of social democracy are shorn of political potential through their apparent embodiment in the Queen. Alongside *The Crown* stands the cultural memory of the Queen’s address to the nation, when she had asked the nation to ‘remain united and resolute’ through the ‘financial difficulties’ and ‘enormous changes’ the pandemic had created - and when extracts from the speech, alongside the Queen’s image, had been displayed on London’s Piccadilly Lights: towering over the capital as a beacon of national unity. However, just as her apparent identification with Fagan masks her hereditary privilege in *The Crown*, the Queen’s call for unity obscures Covid-19’s discriminatory consequences. Her speech places responsibility with ‘the people’ to unite in the image of a monarch - who is able to isolate in one of many palaces.

## **‘Our great imperial family to which we all belong’**

Similar issues of the individual versus the collective occur in the episode ‘48:1’, which focuses on Thatcher and the Queen clashing over imposing Commonwealth sanctions to address apartheid in South Africa. While 48 leaders of Commonwealth countries, and the Queen, are supportive of introducing sanctions, Thatcher is vehemently opposed, arguing that it would decimate the South African economy and affect Britain’s trade. The Queen’s support of sanctions is positioned through her role as Head of the Commonwealth and is presented as maternal.

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The episode opens with the Queen (then heir apparent) giving a 1947 speech in South Africa. Its most famous line, dramatised by Claire Foy playing the younger Queen, reads: ‘I declare before you all that my whole life ... shall be devoted to ... the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong’. As Laura Clancy argues elsewhere, notions of ‘familialism’ in the royal family obscure the politics of monarchy, aristocratic state power and hereditary wealth.<sup>16</sup> Ideas of an *imperial* family also reflect histories of colonial power and the British monarchy as Empire’s figurehead, vested in ideologies of white supremacy. The Queen’s speech attempts to mitigate these histories by presenting herself as being in the service of the Commonwealth, and of the global community that she claims underpins it. The public/private is again blurred, as global politics are rewritten through ‘the family’.

This framing of Commonwealth continues throughout the episode. Thatcher repeatedly emphasises economic logics for refusing to impose sanctions. Following their disagreements - where the British press report on the women’s feud, threatening the monarch’s political neutrality - they meet for the weekly audience. Thatcher defends herself, saying she must ‘put sentimentality to one side’ and take ‘the perspective of a cold balance sheet’. She notes her respect for the Queen’s ‘compassion’, but argues that emotional responses will ‘insult’ ordinary people. Rather, an economically profitable society offers people opportunities to grow. This again depicts Thatcher as the pathological, detached and unsympathetic neoliberal: obsessed with money and indifferent to South Africans’ suffering under the apartheid regime.

The Queen, meanwhile, appears more concerned with morally nurturing Commonwealth citizens. The repeating motif of her Commonwealth ‘family’ depicts the Queen as maternally shielding South Africans from corrupt government regimes. This representation is more than a little problematic given that the British Empire, headed by the monarch, was central to eroding democracy and intensifying racial segregation in South Africa, thereby opening the way to the development of apartheid.<sup>17</sup> The monarch(y)’s historical involvement in this history is unsaid; rather, the Commonwealth can ‘save’ South Africans, headed by the Queen as ‘white saviour’.<sup>18</sup> An episode attempting to comment on postcolonialism, racial segregation and globalisation is therefore reframed as a treatise on the Queen’s compassion.

Romanticising histories of colonial rule chimes with what Paul Gilroy calls ‘postcolonial melancholia’.<sup>19</sup> Gilroy describes how Britain today mourns its



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imperial power through selective nostalgia: for instance, by remembering its alleged role in ‘ending slavery’, but forgetting centuries of atrocities. In *The Crown*, we see a similar repackaging of postcolonial geopolitics through selective depictions of familialism.

This sleight of hand also connects to contemporary forms of ‘woke-washing’. Francesca Sobande discusses the phenomenon of global brands using protest movements, such as Black Lives Matter, to align themselves with social justice and encourage customer loyalty, even though many perpetuate social injustices in their workplaces.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai argue, ‘woke capitalism’ involves little more than corporate (mis)uses of protest and activist slogans.<sup>21</sup> In *The Crown*, the Queen is depicted as ‘woke’ in comparison to Thatcher as the pathological neoliberal, despite the inequalities (and oppressions) inherent to monarchical privilege.<sup>22</sup>

We have seen ‘two different crises articulated together’ through the pandemic: the underlying structural inequalities that have shaped the impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown people in the UK have been starkly revealed; and there has simultaneously been an increasingly visible challenge from contemporary anti-racism and social justice movements.<sup>23</sup> Following the rise of anti-racist protests after the murder of George Floyd by the police, there has been more overt questioning of Britain’s colonial legacies and responsibilities. Potentially, this is why *The Crown* had such resonance: the polysemic nature of cultural texts means that the series can be read through multiple lenses in a conjuncture of crisis.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

In this series of *The Crown*, the Queen and Thatcher are presented as figures operating at the ‘start’ of Thatcherism and the neoliberal project - to audiences for whom Covid-19 is exposing perhaps the biggest crisis in neoliberalism in global memory. Throughout, the Queen and Thatcher are depicted as in opposition. Thatcher explicitly espouses neoliberal individualism and free market ideologies, while the Queen emphasises ‘moral responsibility’. However, ultimately, they are two sides of the same coin. The Queen’s represented ‘solution’ to the South African crisis is for the Commonwealth, an organisation borne from imperial histories that *caused* the crisis, to implement sanctions. Likewise, her solution to Fagan’s distress is ‘moral responsibility’: attempting to redress class inequality through compassion. Neither

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woman is represented as proposing to dismantle the institutions responsible for global social injustice - and indeed, the UK government and the monarchy are two of the more powerful of such institutions. Nor do they challenge structural gender, class, racial or postcolonial inequalities.

The relationship and interactions between Thatcher and the Queen connect with broader issues in the collapsing of private/public and home/work, specifically through mothering and unpaid care work/paid labour, and hierarchies of class privilege. *The Crown* offers capitalist solutions to inequality, through these two women and their various maternal relations.

Audiences negotiate media representations in, through and alongside the present, and we have read *The Crown* while living through a conjuncture of crisis. This context inexorably draws attention to the ways in which the series engages in overt discussion of inequalities, but then repeatedly individualises, rehabilitates and neutralises them through its representations of Thatcher and the Queen. Such individualisation has resonances with the Covid-19 conjuncture, where the British public have been repeatedly blamed for rising infection rates due to their personal ‘irresponsibility’, while the responsibility of the state has been denied, whether this has manifested itself in poor government communications, lack of policy or corrupt dealings in the Conservative Party. The standpoints of both Thatcher and the Queen as depicted in the series serve to normalise such discourses for contemporary audiences, as they negotiate their own relationships to gender, class, race or postcolonial inequalities.

In her pandemic address to the nation, the Queen said that ‘we join with all nations across the globe in a common endeavour’ to recover from Covid-19. Our analysis of *The Crown* demonstrates that this ‘common endeavour’ is not one of equality; rather, systems of privilege need to be structurally addressed if ‘success’ is to ‘belong to everyone one of us’.

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## Notes

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2. Sean O'Grady, 'Queen Elizabeth channelled blitz spirit in rare address - but is this generation up to the task?', *Independent*, 5 April 2020: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/queen-elizabeth-speech-coronavirus-uk-nhs-lockdown-boris-johnson-a9448611.html> (accessed 21.4.21).
3. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, London, Verso 2020.
4. Jo Littler, 'Mothers behaving badly: chaotic hedonism and the crisis of neoliberal social reproduction', *Cultural Studies*, Vol 34 No 4, 2020, pp499-520.
5. BBC, 'Netflix reveals The Crown viewing figures for the first time', 22 January 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51198033> (accessed 20.4.21).
6. The fourth season of *The Crown* has been touted as the most controversial yet. Online news and lifestyle outlets have critiqued the show's representation of Diana's eating disorder and the relationship between Diana, Charles and Camilla for being, among many things, exploitative and insensitive to the royal family, especially considering Diana's death in 1997. See Sonia Rao, 'As "The Crown" tackles recent history with Princess Diana, the show hits a nerve', *Washington Post*, 19 November 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/11/19/the-crown-season-4-princess-diana/> (accessed 17.8.21).
7. See Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2013, for an example of the significance of nostalgic cultural renderings of austerity and their significance to the political present.
8. Anna Bull and Kim Allen, 'Sociological interrogations of the turn to character', *Sociological Research Online*, Vol 23 No2, 2018, p395.
9. This is a belaboured point made in 'The Balmoral Test' episode by the motif of a stag hunted by the royal family at Balmoral, representing Diana's death and the family's role in it.
10. See Tracey Jensen, 'Warmth and wealth: Re-imagining social class in taxonomies of good parenting', *Studies in the Maternal*, Vol 2 No 1, 2010, pp1-13, for an analysis of how individualised and moral notions of character have been recently used to define 'good' parenting, rather than looking to how class and inequalities shape these ideas.
11. Rachel Flint and Miriam Barker, 'Covid and women: Pandemic "massive step back" in equality', BBC News, 3 April 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-56345712> (accessed 26.4.21).
12. Steph Lawler, 'The middle classes and their aristocratic others', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Vol 1 No 3, 2008, pp245-261, p252.
13. See Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*, Oxford/New York, Routledge 2017.
14. See for example (among many) Sara De Benedictis, Kim Allen and Tracey Jensen, 'Portraying poverty: The economics and ethics of factual welfare television', *Cultural*

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*Sociology*, Vol 11 No 3, 2017, pp337-358; or Hannah Hamad, 'Contemporary medical television and crisis in the NHS', *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol 11 No 2, 2016, pp136-150,.

15. Although there's no evidence Fagan and the Queen chatted at length.

16. Laura Clancy, *Running the Family Firm: how the monarchy manages its image and our money*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 2021 forthcoming

17. Richard Dowden, 'Apartheid. Made in Britain', *Independent*, 22 October 2011: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/apartheid-made-britain-richard-dowden-explains-how-churchill-rhodes-and-smuts-caused-black-south-africans-lose-their-rights-1370856.html> (accessed 26.4/21).

18. This is not the only example where problematic representations of whiteness create Commonwealth 'others'. In the episode 'Terra Nullius', Prince Charles and Princess Diana's 1983 royal tour of New Zealand and Australia is represented. A montage of Māori performing the haka is interspersed with footage of Diana vomiting due to her eating disorder. But the haka is traditionally used during war, intended to display strength and unity, not despair and anguish as the montage suggests. The display reduces the haka to emphasise Diana's white fragility and reproduces hierarchies of racial supremacy inherent within a white monarchy with global rule.

19. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire*, London, Routledge 2004.

20. Francesca Sobande, 'Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol 54 No 11, 2019, pp2723-45.

21. Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, 'Woke? Affect, neoliberalism, marginalised identities and consumer culture', *New Formations: A journal of culture/theory/politics*, No 101, 2021, pp10-27.

22. In September 2021, Sir Ken Olisa claimed that the Queen and the royal family support the Black Lives Matter movement. In response, Adjoa, a spokesperson for Black Lives Matter UK, said 'actions speak louder than words. The Queen sits on a throne made from colonial plunder'. Haroon Siddique and Rowena Mason, 'BLM gives cautious welcome to Queen's reported backing', 10 September 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/10/blm-gives-cautious-welcome-to-queens-reported-backing> (accessed 07.10.21).

23. Paul Gilroy and Alondra Nelson, 'In conversation with Alondra Nelson', 8 June 2020: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-alondra-nelson> (accessed 26.4.21).

24. Stuart Hall [1973], 'Encoding, decoding', in S. During (ed), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London, Routledge 1991, pp90-103. For a more overt example of how cultural comedic texts work through ambivalent meanings see also Sharon Lockyer and Sara De Benedictis, 'Performing pregnancy: Comic content, critique and ambivalence in pregnant stand-up comedy', under review.