

Kate's Journey

An Exercise in Narrative Overtourism

Von: Julika Griem

On 9 September 2024, the Prince and Princess of Wales released an unusual video to announce and celebrate the end of Catherine's 9-month chemotherapy. The intricately choreographed 3-minute clip deviated from well-worn conventions of English monarchic self-fashioning in quite a few ways: most strikingly through a surprising display of marital and familial tenderness and intimacy.¹

As Marina Hyde pointed out in her column for *The Guardian*, the royal couple again relied on the service of Will War, whose professional video work has already supported, among others, Red Bull, Uber Eats, Miele, Puma, Jamie Oliver, Ed Sheeran and Stanley Tucci: "Despite artfully included clips of Prince George asking of a camera 'Is this filming?', the video was not captured by a GoPro on a picnic rug, but by a crew and a significant post-production operation, who made studied use of filters and slow motion, switching from sweeping shots to grainy scenes designed to ape cine film."² As a story to announce Kate's comeback, the video also relies on powerful narrative tropes. While the children's voices can be heard piping in, for the core messages we have to follow the personal voice-over orchestrating Kate's progress as a process of bodily and spiritual healing, modeled as a journey overcoming existential obstacles and hardships. In her own voice, she describes the events of the past nine months by focusing on a seminal metaphor: "The cancer journey is complex, scary and unpredictable for everyone."³ In further segments of her commentary, her treatment is illustrated as a movement gaining telos, a path leading from darkness to light, from existential insecurity to new insight: "To all those who are continuing their own cancer journey – I remain with you, side by side, hand in hand. Out of darkness, can come light, so let that light shine bright."⁴ A path serves as the clip's spatial plot backbone, the material ground of Kate's mental and spiritual journey. We follow the young Royal Family on a walk from the country to the seaside, accompanying their joyful games in the meadows and forests of a late English summer in Norfolk. On the one hand, the familial sojourn is staged as a leisurely stroll: There is ample time to engage with ferns and blossoms, logs and treetops, to play and stay. On the other hand, the tight narrative frame doesn't allow for truly aimless lingering. The family's symbolically enhanced promenade sticks to a path leading them to the beach – rewarding them with further traditional experiences of refreshment, restoration and rebirth at the sight of the open sea.

The narrative dramaturgy of Kate's journey perfectly combines linear and circular movement carefully balanced to transform potentially threatening openness into reassuring closure. As a storytelling formula to be scaled between the nutshell of Instagram videos and the large canvas of fantasy series, the metaphor of the journey goes back a long way. In instrumental and commercial communication in particular, it has been alive and kicking since Joseph Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1944) was picked up by Hollywood screen writers: The idea of shaping stories according to the pattern of a hero setting out to overcome obstacles and experience meaningful breakthroughs is currently taught in advertising and management, handed down in therapy and self-help groups⁵ and recommended as a powerful instrument of political rhetoric, ecological transformation and science communication. Through this process of professionally driven dissemination, "the journey" is no longer treated merely as thematic content, but has morphed into a master model of storytelling itself. As such, it does not simply pick up on the old idea that everyone who has come home from a journey will have to tell good stories. We are, additionally, led to believe that even those who don't have the chance to renew themselves through travelling are best advised to shape their story according to the formula of a trip into foreign dimensions to maximize meaning. The success story of this mantra can be corroborated by a look at the non-fiction market: In more and more books by academic writers (increasingly guided by professional agents and ghosting storytellers), readers are invited to join the author on a journey, and entire texts comply to a touristic dramaturgy of surprising sights and turns promising insight and learning from chapter to chapter.

Kate's family video also testifies to the prolific adaptability of the narrative master trope of the journey. Here, it is seamlessly adapted to a female protagonist fighting cancer as a courageous role model of humble endurance under existential stress: Kate is clearly the heroine of this journey, reborn with motherly leadership legitimized through the power of an ever benevolently protective nature. In greater detail, the pattern of the journey allows for a number of effective modifications to stabilize the Royal imaginary in a moment of personal and political crisis. To achieve this, Kate's journey creates a dominant sense of lofty continuity after dramatic caesura. We are given a peacefully – or rather stubbornly – unchanged version of merry old England, unmarred by news of industrial waste and feces ruining the beaches and rivers of contemporary Great Britain. A tame version of Shakespeare's green world not as a treacherous playground for spirits, jesters and queerly erring lovers, but rather an eternally safe haven for a modern family threatened by illness and unfair media coverage haunting cancer-stricken Kate with conspiracy theories; providing them with a timeless retreat only populated by birds and butterflies where they can recover in peace, rewarded by everlasting heteronormative romance.

Despite or perhaps due to their clearly escapist thrust, these cherished images of a green England also lend themselves to contemporary ecological fantasizing. They smoothly tie in with the royal self-description of nature protection promoted by King Charles and his first son. In this context of self-fashioning, the young Royal Family's down-to-earth journey on

foot solidifies gestures of ecological responsibility. In its careful narrative compression, their strolling gains the thrust of a pedestrian mission, a message of downsized travel in the name of mental and planetary health: no guilty flight to a protected private island in the Caribbean, just a simple domestic family walk from the woods to the sea. Endowed with an appealingly democratic impetus, it is a walk every ordinary family can undertake, to mobilize strength by rediscovering the beauty of immediate environments. Naturally, the natural habitat of the journey celebrated in the video must remain unspoiled by hard scientific facts and such bad news as current reports on the damage of overtourism. At the same time, the narrative vehicle of the journey is perfectly suited to abstract gestures of transformation which safely remain within a sphere of staging ecological problems as matters of personal, psychological and spiritual healing. This becomes particularly clear in the image of Kate and the butterfly, conventionally reduced to a time-worn animal symbol of innocuous transformation, a promise of nature's unlimited offers to guide erring humans in their desperately searching journeys.

Next to its emotional celebration of a family healing through allegedly unspoiled nature, the most ingenious spin of the clip can be seen in a medial context. Within the stream of images and news regularly publicizing and marketing the British Royals, the family video practices clever mimicry of another journey undertaken in the recent troublesome history of the Royal Family. It was Meghan and Harry – the Sussexes – who in early 2020 left merry old England for another coast in a dramatically staged separation: Deeply estranged from his father and brother, Harry began a new life on another heavily archetypical seaside – the destination of many American dreams and home of his Californian wife. Soon after having settled in their Montecito mansion, the Sussexes promoted their own version of a stripped-down Garden of Eden populated by dogs and chicken, later accompanied by a still fledgling brand of home-made marmalade and further products promising a good simple life in harmony with local communities and their environment. While Meghan is regularly shown as a visitor to local farmers' markets, both Sussexes have heavily relied on the trope of the journey to endow their new role with meaning: In motivational speeches published on the site of their Archwell Foundation, as well as on trips to various continents promoting mental health. J.R. Moehringer, the renowned public ghostwriter of Harry's bestselling memoir *Spare*, stayed away from the metaphor of the journey, instead relying on Shakespearean references to script the prince's familial ordeal. The book does, however, introduce Meghan on the occasion of the couple's first date as an avid reader of the feminist midcult classic *Eat, Prey, Love*, a formative example of self-help shaped as spiritual and inspirational tourism. As if echoing this key scene, a more recent biography of Harry is titled *A Prince's Journey: The Life and Adventures of Prince Harry*. And his charity work for the Invictus Games has been promoted as "A Journey to Invictus".

In and beyond the Windsor's highly mediated family constellation, California has established itself as fertile ground for the professionalized and mythicized art of storytelling linking Hollywood's spin doctor Campbell to the hero's journeys of Silicon Valley leaders. As

a substantial female player, the entrepreneur and literary power broker Oprah Winfrey works her own turf, operating in the direct neighborhood of Harry and Meghan to market her version of staying healthy through spiritual journeying. Just recently, a day after the second anniversary of the death of Queen Elizabeth, Meghan could be seen in animated conversation with Oprah during the opening of a new book shop in Montecito called “Godmothers”. Despite these many gestures to come across as rooted in a restored healthy life on healthy Californian ground, Meghan remains confronted with coverage regularly taking stock of luxury outfits signaling her distance from the needs of ordinary folks.

Such placements and positionings illustrate how the media war between the Waleses and the Sussexes will continue to be fought in closest bilateral observation across the Atlantic. As Marina Hyde put it: To “control the narrative”, Kate and William cannot not compete with Harry’s and Meghan’s “barefoot California content” on the most professional level.⁶ Thus, the clip celebrating Kate’s journey through chemotherapy indirectly refers to “the other wife” by staging Kate in a conspicuously demure frock, not shying away from the modest ruffles of a classical English rose in the style of beloved Jane Austen adaptations, never outshining the glory of nature through a colour palate perfectly blending shades of beige and green. The recent video carves out in a nutshell how the wives’ mediated contest continues to be carried out in the arenas of fashion and lifestyle. At a first glance, Kate seems to be trespassing into Meghan territory by invoking a mood of “eat, pray, picnic” clad in a dress Barbara Ellen described as “imperial hippie”.⁷ At a closer look, however, different national and political styles of celebrating the soft power of “bosswomaning” can be distinguished. Whereas Meghan’s guidance over Harry relies on constant handholding and is orchestrated by her mother and assorted “godmothers” of Hollywood feminism, Kate in the new video sticks to the middle ground of her upbringing: Her family cure of “pastoral smooching” is visually supported by card games with her parents, but not by Charles and Camilla.⁸ The recent video thus manages to send a highly compressed message concerning the struggling brothers: Through its surprisingly open display of affective gestures, William also comes across as reborn through Kate’s ordeal; contrasting Harry’s ongoing self-exploration, images of sovereign vulnerability suggest that his wife’s cancer have helped him to overcome the illness of toxic English restraint more impressively than Meghan’s therapeutic guidance could ever cure the other brother.

Needless to say, stable storytelling clichés and antagonisms in suggestive combination with racial and nationalist stereotypes continue to underscore the feuding families’ media coverage and performance. The family video powerfully infused by Kate’s journey may thus mark a temporary victory in an ongoing feud driven by symbolic outbidding: By picking up on Harry and Meghan’s Californian moves and recontextualizing them in an English imaginary, Kate and William for the moment have gained some ground through a gesture of downsizing, celebrating a conspicuous modesty that seems to harmonize tastefully with the gloomy hardships of the new Labour austerity politics. For a triumphant moment of exemplary healing, it does not take drastic economic announcements or even a village –

such as Montecito – but just a family knowing how to cherish the simplest details of a walk. The largest journeys shall be those undertaken with the most modest means, allowing the Royals to walk symbolically “hand in hand” across any social boundaries benevolently wiped out in a frozen version of eternally invigorating English scenery.

Let’s paradoxically hope the clip’s greenwashing in the name of Royal undertourism will at least buy Kate some peace and privacy.

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