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Celebrity as Cultural Authority:  
Media, Representation and the Politics of Fame

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**Abstract**

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Fame is a powerful source of cultural authority in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century media culture. Celebrities, and celebritizing discourses, are a staple of sanctioned knowledge and an important point of intervention in the study of representation and identity. This project asks how celebrity as a phenomenon frames social issues and how it intersects citizenship and consumer life. Using examples of celebrity philanthropy and activism, it looks at the ways in which the media create and sanction expertise and how celebrity as cultural authority is shifting in the era of new media. One premise of this study is that while celebrity is inevitable, it is also dynamic. I look at how the entertainment, political and media industries work together to produce celebrity and how online media expand the reach and possibilities of mediatized fame. I take on three thematic cases: two explore the use of culture industry celebrity on the “distant” problems of Africa; a third looks at how online media users produce a celebritized cultural authority regarding the domestic issue of homophobic bullying. I employ a cultural studies analysis on campaign publicity and media coverage of these cases. Industry celebrities, from Matt Damon to

Madonna, deploy their fame on global problems such as poverty and AIDS; their charitable work, (re)produced unproblematically in the mainstream media, constructs Africa as primitive, exotic and passive. Celebrity is also a commercial transaction; I study Bono's Product RED campaign as a site of branded activism. People buy African-themed items, and the campaign markets the continent and its peoples to consumers as a lifestyle. Yet new media production enables a cultural authority that is not entirely beholden to the blazing spectacle of Hollywood fame. The *It Gets Better* campaign against homophobic bullying represents a flatter, more dispersed celebrity intervention. It is no less an expression of consumer capitalism, but Web 2.0 celebritization can be deployed to ends not wholly subsumed within the culture industries. This study demonstrates the problematic nature of culture industry celebrity intervention. It suggests that online media celebrity produce problematic discourses as well, yet they have potential to enable a progressive collectivized authority.

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## **Introduction: Reading Celebrity Culture**

*“Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.... That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.” (Stuart Hall, 1981)*

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century it seems that nearly everything is about celebrity.

Popular culture, digital culture, 24-hour news and entertainment continually produce fame and monetize its vast appeal. Social issues appear to have more importance when a famous movie star or pop singer talks about them. The media filter news through the famous source and give it a visual presence via images of well-known people. Cable news programs interview actors about politics. Reporters cover ‘foreign’ news by following A-listers to distant locales. Celebrities have always managed their personas on and off stage, to be sure, but media culture has never been more obsessed with cataloguing and dissecting their off-stage doings. Celebrity is everywhere and everything.

I come to this project by way of a 20-year career in journalism, starting in the 1980s, through which I saw vast changes in the business from economic, managerial, professional and technological perspectives. All of these influences on media content and culture are interconnected. As a generalist who covered everything from sports to politics to entertainment, and later in editor and managerial positions, I had innumerable opportunities to observe the changing media landscape. I saw that celebrity began to drive the news agenda to a greater extent than at the beginning of my career. At times these changes, owing to both shifting political economy and new

technologies, felt like a degradation of the craft. At other times it seemed the celebritization of news provided an avenue for engaging the readers and listeners (and later viewers) of my news agency's work in new and interesting ways. In some ways I was a nerd who was stuck with popular culture. It was a way to tell news stories.

Stuart Hall stated 30 years ago that he cared about popular culture insofar as it is a site of struggle, where competing interests strive to form consent and resistance, to maintain and transform hegemonies. Otherwise he didn't "give a damn about it." (1981a, p. 239). Christopher Bell (2010) puts it even more pointedly, if hyperbolically, when he states that the study of celebrity is nothing less than the study of Western history (p. 8). To be sure it is fundamentally linked to the ideologies of consumer capitalism and to our contemporary notions of engagement with public life. Celebrity, as a key site of contestation over meaning and representation, is integral to our identities as consumers and citizens.

I share Hall's perspective on popular culture. In the course of this work I came to see the shifting roles of both news and popular culture as neither inherently negative nor positive, particularly as I met university students who sometimes did not read traditional mainstream news but who could formulate cogent and sophisticated media critiques. They are "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), a generation of visual learners that has grown up steeped in new media. I realized that celebrity is one area where students can easily engage in social and political issues. I also discovered that most of them knew far more about celebrity and popular culture than I did. I began to imagine this project, an exploration of the relationship between celebrity and cultural authority, as an

intervention into both popular culture and journalism scholarship, as not a great deal of work took up the two as a complex cultural force.

With this goal in mind, my research examines celebrity as a phenomenon that requires us to re-imagine social life and go beyond arguments about whether the public sphere is expanding or shrivelling. Celebrity not only disrupts the notion of a public sphere characterized by solemn rational debate as Habermas (1989) idealized it, it is a site where commerce and citizenship are mutually constitutive, and always part of media culture, including new media. With celebrity, news is a genre of popular culture. I do not make this claim lightly. Of course the press is specifically protected in the constitutional structures of major democracies, so it holds a unique place in public life. This fact is the basis of much excellent journalism scholarship and is perhaps one reason that news and popular culture are often distinct objects of study in academic research.

Yet the ubiquity of celebrity brings news into the same orbit with other popular culture. Through celebrities' off-stage performances as well as their creative work we can observe the impact of fame on public life. For one thing, the growth of celebrity activism is a cultural phenomenon that conflates citizen-subject and consumer-subject. As well, online media challenge the distinction between celebrity and audience or producer and consumer. New media enable forms of well-knownness that act upon the traditional notion of 'stars' created and managed by the culture industries. It is limiting to consider a celebritized public sphere simply as a place of decline. A more interesting approach is to think of it as being integral to the subject formation of the contemporary citizen-consumer, to ask "why this phenomenon now and what are its implications?" These lines of inquiry—celebritized subjectivity and the evolving role of celebrity

authority in social/political life—are both under theorized. Here I offer a contribution that I hope does some work in that regard.

### **Models of Celebrity Engagement**

Entertainment celebrities are active in philanthropy, social activism and even international diplomacy (Cooper, 2008). Famous people put their names behind cause marketing campaigns, where corporations support a social cause through the sale of their products. Sometimes, as with the elite pen and watchmaker Mont Blanc, this form of marketing is simply a shill for luxury goods and elite causes.<sup>1</sup> Celebrities endorse campaigns that focus more directly on poverty, social justice, politics or the environment. All celebrity interventions involve some kind of branding, representation and production of identity. For the purposes of this discussion I offer up several models of celebrity activism and endorsement. While I do not take them all up equally within this project I find it useful to think of celebrity work generally in these terms.

Rock star Bono's Product RED campaign is an example of cause marketing created with the express purpose of raising money to help treat the AIDS pandemic in Africa. He has engaged other celebrities and iconic brands such as Nike, The Gap, Converse, Dell and Apple attach themselves to the RED brand as part of their corporate social responsibility campaigns. He is unapologetic about using the marketplace to raise money; in fact he calls the project "hard commerce" (Bono tunes in, 2006). More than 20 companies donate a portion of profits from various products they designate as RED. The

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006-07 actor Nicolas Cage was a Mont Blanc "ambassador" in the context of a

money goes to a public-private partnership called the Global Fund, which distributes it to African countries designated by the campaign.

Individual intervention is a second model of high-profile celebrity engagement. Oprah Winfrey's school in South Africa exemplifies this. It is highly personal and she is the sole driving celebrity force behind her namesake Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls. As the website states, the goal is to "equip students with the intellectual and social skills necessary to assume positions of leadership in South Africa and abroad" (Winfrey, 2011). The school, which opened in 2007, houses about 380 girls from Grades 7 through 12 (Winfrey, 2011). Winfrey handpicked the first crop of students. She uses her personal money and name to make an individual intervention. Madonna sought to emulate this model in Malawi, a case I take up in this study. At the time of this writing, her *Raising Malawi* charity has abandoned plans to build a similar girls' school amid a controversy over funding and leadership. She has since taken up with the organization BuildOn to help fund the construction of numerous smaller schools in Malawi. Her work has been beset by problems and controversies. The media have pilloried her and the Malawi government insists Madonna has not consulted it and has left a trail of broken promises (cf. Laing, 2012).

A third model of celebrity involvement in so-called Third World<sup>2</sup> countries could be categorized under the heading of diplomacy. Angelina Jolie may be the best-known

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<sup>2</sup> I follow Young's (1990, pp. 11-12) discussion of the terms First and Third World. Third World had a positive connotation at its 1955 inception at the Bandung Conference of new Asian and African nations. It was proposed on the model of the French Revolution's Third Estate—the people. Given that other terms such as core and periphery, north and south are equally bound up with relations of domination, the terms First and Third world are worth reclaiming in the positive sense from which they originated.

actor in this category with her work as a “goodwill ambassador” for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Her role with the UN takes her around the world to visit displaced peoples. Actor Don Cheadle, who became a UN ambassador for environmental programs in 2010 has a similar role, as does Forest Whitaker, who signed on with UNESCO in 2011. This approach to philanthropy does not involve raising money or selling products. Their work as ambassadors is mostly about visibility and moral suasion with government leaders.

In a similar vein is actor George Clooney, who with no official role, has worked extensively in Sudan to monitor and prevent genocide. He has gone so far as to buy a satellite to take pictures of government activities as a deterrent to authorities in the country (cf. Benjamin, 2011). He trains his diplomatic sights on leaders, such as the Obama White House and the leadership in North and South Sudan. He uses the press to publicize his movements between Sudan and the halls of power. Bono does similar diplomacy work. He meets with presidents, prime ministers and popes about the intersecting issues poverty, international debt and health crises. He has no trouble getting a meeting with leaders around the world; many consider him an expert on the developing world.

A fourth model of celebrity intervention, which I begin to explore in the final chapter, is a flatter production that flows from the capabilities of digital media. My interest in new media, a growing area of scholarship, is in the ways in which it facilitates celebrity performances of identity, its role in producing cultural authority, and how this more grassroots performance of self interacts with traditional media. I use the *It Gets Better* online project, which Seattle journalist Dan Savage launched in 2010 as a

way to explore how digital media contribute to shifting notions of identity and how they produce celebritized expertise and cultural authority.

### **Research Questions and Arguments**

In this project I roughly delineate two different iterations of celebrity: that which is produced directly in a triangulated relationship with the culture industries and the audience or public, and that which does not exclude those sites but is born of digital media. Social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are important in the production of fame, or at least in celebritized discourses that are available to people outside of culture industries such as film, television, music and journalism. Digital media make renown possible for more people; some of those viral celebrities cross into culture industry fame and others perform a kind of celebrity that thrives mostly online.

Specifically I ask: What happens when culture industry celebrities get involved in social issues, and how might new media create space for alternative interventions? What sort of cultural authority issues from celebrities as spokespeople for causes? How do the news media treat the celebrity, who serves an important function in news as an expert and an eyewitness? Celebrities play a role in constructing identity, both for the audience and fan base they address and for the subjectivities of the people they represent. What conceptions of identity do celebrities produce when they speak for others? What happens when digital media enable everyday people to speak for themselves? What sort of celebrity and cultural authority issues from new media?

I make three overarching arguments in this project. The first is that news and popular culture together generate powerful discourses that claim authority to represent

distant locales and peoples as Other. Otherness, as bell hooks argues, is a production of difference by people of dominant races, classes, genders and sexual practices (hooks, 2001/1992, p. 425). Otherness is also the consumption of that difference; in the case of celebrity philanthropy and activism, celebrities invite the audience to consume for stated altruistic ends. The desire for the Other, or in this case the desire to help the Other, is “an affirmation of cultural plurality” (hooks, 2001/1992, p. 426); it implies universality. Yet the desire is about the pleasure and agency of the powerful, wrapped in cultural myth about progressive politics and social change (p. 428). The celebrity gaze on Africa commodifies its peoples, and indeed deploys many of the same tropes of primitivism and difference that hooks describes. It engages well-worn tales of white salvation that European countries used to justify colonizing the continent.

I also argue that A-list celebrity intervention is an exercise in commodifying the cause. In the case of Africa, celebrities act as a kind of *enchanted* agent. They bring allure and uplifting energy but they inevitably produce a product—the celebrity, the distant Other and philanthropy itself. Celebrities are once and for all brands and commodities. Famous people effectively create a Brand Africa for the domestic Western audience, one that gives increased value to their own brands as it serves an identified social need. Celebrities use their cultural authority to *enchant* the consumer, to make her feel a sense of generosity and wonder. Yet, as I discuss with Product RED, the people the campaign claims to speak for also become part of the RED product line. At the same time it invites consumers to view their shopping as rebellious activism.

Digital media are, of course, not a solution to the colonizing effects of mediatized celebrity philanthropy and activism. However I argue in the final chapter that new

media platforms enable a flatter, broader production of identity that creates space for stereotyped and marginalized people to speak for themselves. I explore how the *It Gets Better* project, launched in response to the bullying of LGBT people in the United States, produces a celebritized discourse of belonging. The case serves as a stark reminder that celebrity can, and should, legitimize social issues “at home.” One key reason the project is different, despite an overarching neo-liberal claim to authority, is that it is working on the home front and that its design as a new media project invites participation and critique.

### **Cultural Studies as Methodology**

Critical cultural studies, with its emphasis on representation, agency and meaning making, provides both theory and method for this project. A cultural studies analysis does not claim to stand on the outside as an observer, creating objective knowledge about the world. It is a political intervention that excavates beneath the ideological common sense of everyday life to unearth ways of knowing that have been buried or discredited. As Jennifer Daryl Slack writes, a cultural studies approach does not treat theory as an application of a value-free heuristic; rather, it “works with the notion of theory as a ‘detour’ to help ground our engagement with what newly confronts us and to let that engagement provide the ground for retheorizing.” Theory is a practice and a methodology and it is a formal conceptual tool as well as a ‘trying out’ of a way of theorizing” (p. 113). Thus theorizing is not about proving or disproving hypotheses; it is about “the ability to work with our always inadequate theories to help us move understanding ‘a little farther down the road.’”

This approach acknowledges that all knowledge is tentative and provisional. Furthermore it is always political. Knowledge is most often viewed as common sense, as beyond the need for question, because of ideology. All knowledge is a creature of the structures and strands of power that legitimize it as a “reality” that needs no justification. As Stuart Hall (1981b) notes, ideology is a process, neither the product of individual consciousness nor wholly structural. It is an articulation between the two. It is “those images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 31). In other words, ideologies do the work of reproducing social relations and vice versa. There is no outside of ideology in this view, and cultural studies aims to call out the ideological commonplace and propose alternatives, equally ideological.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were among the early theorists of mass media in the critical tradition. They brought Marx’s diagnosis of industrial capitalism to the cultural realm in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to argue that the media had become an assembly line for culture just as capitalists mass-produced consumer goods. In their polemical 1940s essay *The Culture Industry* (1972) the two Frankfurt School scholars argued that the convergence of mass media technologies and industrial interests had changed the nature of artistic expression and consumption. Art had become a mass distribution mechanism for capitalist ideology, delivering it in amusing packages that held the audience in its thrall.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s important political-economic critique was among the first to link the interests of media companies with the powerful industrial economy. Later theorists found their position totalizing and overly pessimistic regarding the

potential of the audience to make meanings that challenge ideas and bring about change. Some, including those of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, moved to remedy the Frankfurt School's elitist distinction between "art" and "mass culture." Culture *is* daily life; "culture is ordinary," as Raymond Williams, a founder of British Cultural Studies, argued. Thus began a legacy that took the working classes seriously as a source of knowledge, and that did not place "art" on a pedestal glowering down on popular culture. In later years, Stuart Hall brought race and a post-colonial turn to this discussion. Feminist scholars such as Angela McRobbie also forced gender onto a research agenda that had been dominated by men. As Hall once joked, feminism came like a "thief in the night. Broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies" (1992, p. 269). The critical project grew and matured, and continues to develop in post-colonial contexts.

The study of everyday life and popular representation opened up the possibility for looking at culture as a circuit in which audiences are influencing the production of culture and producers are also audiences. The Birmingham School and others did not reject the powerful influence of the media industries and of other institutions, or ideological apparatuses as Louis Althusser called them. But Williams, Hall, McRobbie and other scholars insisted that "ordinary" popular culture is a powerful source of resistance and change as well as of capitalist ideology and hegemonic control.

Growing out of this rich tradition, which I have only glossed here, some cultural studies scholars identify three common methodologies that combine to help us 'read' culture: textual analysis, political economy and audience reception. This project relies heavily on textual analysis and also on political economy. As Douglas Kellner (2011)

argues, these strands, or methods of analysis, can be made to work in tandem to provide a multiperspectival approach that can examine production, reception and content.

Cultural studies is a theory and method that assumes audiences and publics make meaning from media culture, from all culture. While texts, always ideological, represent dominant or “preferred” meanings (Hall, 2001) that producers may be aware of or not, people make varied meanings and uses of that cultural production. Meaning is situated in social location, including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Knowledge is contextual, as is people’s uptake and adaptation of it.

Using this approach I examine the ways in which celebrity works as an ideological process in contemporary Euro-North American life. By combining theory and method in this way I read the dominant meanings within specific sites and in the context of what they say about various social categories and in terms of who gets to speak.

Cultural studies is my method for connecting textual analyses to consumer capitalism and to the broader (global) political economy. This approach enables me to sift through the common sense that makes celebrity a ubiquitous and seldom-questioned ideological process within contemporary culture.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter 1 I lay out the theoretical framework for the project and orient it to literatures on celebrity, identity and lifestyle. I argue that news and popular culture are entwined in the production of celebrity as a powerful form of cultural authority in so-called Western societies. Journalism relies heavily on its professional stance of distance and objectivity, yet in the current moment it relies equally on the star power of celebrity

sources. The two—journalism and celebrity—legitimate each other and produce shifting notions of what counts as expert knowledge. They precipitate what I call “vocational crossings” where different kinds of fame and different categories of *well-knownness* inoculate each other and continually reproduce cultural authority in the form of sanctioned expertise.

These crossings of fame, between entertainment, politics, journalism, and more traditional sources of expertise are particularly active in celebrity philanthropy. In Chapter 2, I examine how celebrities produce themselves as experts, via news and popular culture, and how journalism acts as a lubricant in that process. A number of celebrity projects, and the publicity around them, reproduce neocolonial perceptions of race and gender as they highlight important issues relating to global poverty, AIDS and displacement. I examine several cases to make this argument, including Bono’s Product RED campaign, Angelina Jolie’s work as a United Nations goodwill ambassador, and Madonna’s charitable work in Malawi.

With big-name celebrity intervention comes branding. In chapter 3, I explore how celebrity is used to brand identity for the consumer in the name of finding a ‘cure’ for social problems. The Product RED campaign is an unabashedly commercial response to the AIDS pandemic in Africa. It raises money specifically by selling commercial goods in partnership with large well-known brands in Europe and North America. The campaign also bills itself as activism, however, and that has large-scale implications for how audiences and publics perceive themselves as consumer-citizens. In a sense, while Chapter 2 explores the celebritized construction of the Other on distant shores in the

name of global capital, Chapter 3 examines the construction of the consumer and maintenance of global capital on the home front.

In Chapter 4, I begin a foray into how the ubiquity of celebrity operates, or might be made to operate, when it is generated through digital media. People, at least some people, can represent themselves online. They can play a proactive role in their own identity production in ways that are not possible when culture-industry fame is the singular driving force behind a social cause. These representations are still celebritized, and not a replacement or 'cure' for Hollywood-style celebrity. In fact many of the performances I look at produce what looks like a reality-television model. And some of the people who have achieved 'viral' celebrity via *It Gets Better* have tried to capitalize on it. But their celebrity produces a more collective kind of cultural authority. This chapter is an opening argument that the campaign demonstrates the potential of online media as a source of identity, agency and expertise for marginalized voices.

This project does not juxtapose culture industry celebrity with what I have tentatively called everyday celebrity. The two are obviously enmeshed. I also do not claim that there is a direct correlation between celebrities' visibility in Africa and the more locally focused project against bullying. But nearly all celebrity intervention is predicated upon a well-known person's stated belief that they must use their good fortune and great privilege for a 'higher' purpose. Within that intention, individual celebrities make choices about how they will intervene, what cause they will endorse. Journalism, for the most part, publicizes their good works unquestioningly. Given that, many well-known people choose distant locales, particularly Africa, for the focus of their off-stage public lives. As I argue throughout, that choice to help the distant Other has far-

reaching consequences. It is a political act that, time and again, shores up deep historical stereotypes. The question I begin to ask in the final chapter is, how might the flatter, more collectivised authority of digital culture work to enable the agency that comes from speaking for oneself.

## Chapter 1 Media, Celebrity, and Cultural Authority

*"I want my show to be entertaining. The most pompous, humorless people in the world think it's only news if people are dying. It's not. News is many things; it comes in many guises. Some of it is disaster and tragedy, and some of it is incredibly inspiring and uplifting. Some of it is just good old fashioned entertainment." – Journalist Piers Morgan (Bernstein, 2011).*

If ever there were a distinction between news and entertainment, the 'solemn' and the 'frivolous,' it has been blurred by the torrent of information and images that cascade across our televisions and computer screens, that grace the front pages (or home pages) of newspapers and magazines, and that explode from new-media locales such as blogs and social networking. Popular culture, news and political life are fused as never before, changing what it means to be informed and entertained, and changing our engagement with social issues and our thinking about whom we seek out as legitimate authorities on the important questions of our day. Celebrity, for one, is embedded in our social and political lives. It is a staple of daily life—online and across all modes of mass media.

Any mainstream journalist knows that 'names' drive the news agenda. Entertainment media reach across the social landscape. Gossip about celebrities is bread and butter for all media genres, and celebrities "Tweet" and "Facebook" to garner publicity or to balance the public narrative of their "private" lives. Well-known people from film, television, music, sports, politics and even those just famous for being famous, are an integral part of the zeitgeist of Euro-North American society. Whether we are pop culture aficionados or ardent naysayers, engaged or indifferent, the 'celebritized' social

world influences us in untold ways—from our style of dress to the ways we cast and perform our identities to the issues we discuss and what we gossip about.

Celebrity as a phenomenon plays something of an agenda-setting role in the social issues of our day, as I will argue. Celebrities, if they do not tell us what to think, they tell us what to think about, to adapt an old news adage. Entertainment personalities' creative production provides social commentary, either implicitly or explicitly. They endorse causes such as the environment or poverty. They put their names to aid and disaster relief, to political causes, and they sometimes donate money directly. Famous people such as Bono, Oprah, Madonna, Angelina Jolie, Don Cheadle, Alicia Keys and George Clooney use their celebrity power to force important issues onto the public agenda. The news media tout them as experts even as the tabloid press sometimes derides them as shallow or narcissistic. Many politicians, too, are celebrities whose affective power fuels their legislative authority. Be it the mega-star power of Barack Obama or Sarah Palin, or the actor-turned-politician cache' of Ronald Reagan or Britain's Glenda Jackson, star politicians possess an emotional currency beyond that of their lesser-light colleagues.

The media, with a heightened fixation on celebrity, play an important role in reshaping the very notion of expertise and authoritative voice, and in the identities of consumer-citizens. Celebrities, as spokespeople for causes (and often for distant Others), have ready access to political and business leaders as well as to the more traditional credentialed experts who have long been a key source of knowledge. Importantly, they have ready access to us, the hyper-mediated audience. They can engage us, and we them, via many channels. This mediated relationship is intimately bound up with questions of

power, of representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and so on.

The shift regarding expertise matters because it reminds us of the importance of one of the foundational questions in cultural and media studies: Who gets to speak, and for whom? The question of whose voice gets heard, what issues matter or, in journalism parlance, what counts as “news,” is entwined with the saturation presence of media in our lives. We are marinating in it, as I tell my students. And that alone makes the presence of celebrity voices ubiquitous. We can barely avoid knowing what particular celebrities are doing or paying attention to, be it a social cause, a new creative project, or their more personal life choices regarding relationship and children.

I begin this chapter by discussing how the crossover of “vocational” voices in the media is a factor in shaping our notions of cultural authority. I argue that it is appropriate to examine news as popular culture in the context of this project. I explore existing definitions of celebrity and trace the literature on how journalism has derived expertise, both generally and as a professional routine. I end with a discussion on the flattening out of expertise, the “demotic” turn, as Graeme Turner (2010) calls it, and its link to emerging iterations of fame. The point of this discussion is not to decry a lost purity of knowledge that kept the public sphere sterilized from the pathogens of market and entertainment. Rather, it is to examine what it means to have “expertise” built, for better and worse, upon a foundation of affect, celebrity, and consumption, as much as it is based upon claims to specialized knowledge. This turn has complex implications for contemporary identity formation and for how people strive to maintain and transform power and privilege.

## Celebrity “Vocations” in the Mediascape

My arguments stem from the empirical observation that, in the current media environment, the lines between different “vocations” are shifting the boundaries of what it means to be an expert. There is tremendous crossover between celebrities, journalists, political figures, and traditionally credentialed experts such as academics, medical specialists or military figures. The blurring of “cultural boundaries” as Mike Featherstone has called it (1991), presents a blended notion of authority for the contemporary consumer of media culture to fathom. These shifting boundaries produce a kind of synergy that includes, but extends beyond, the fact of actors or sports figures becoming politicians and politicians being stars.

Journalist Anderson Cooper is but one example of a media celebrity whose work pays little homage to the traditional lines between news and entertainment. His nightly CNN program makes tough news decisions such as staying with the uprisings in Egypt and Libya when other media had moved on. Other journalists and commentators have lauded him as a leader for the way he held the U.S. government to account for its handling of the Katrina disaster in 2005 (cf. Van Meter, 2005). He also routinely interviews stars, including Lady Gaga and Angelina Jolie both on his AC 360 cable show and in other television venues. His post-Emmy Gaga special found him following the pop star around London for CBS’s *60 Minutes* (Cooper, 2011). In the 2011 New Year’s week news doldrums, Cooper interviewed Rosanne Barr, Ted Nugent and Joan Rivers among others about their views on political issues for his CNN show. What Ted Nugent thinks about the Tea Party and U.S. economic policy is clearly as important to some corners of journalism as is the view of a traditional credentialed expert source. In the fall of 2011

he began a syndicated daytime talk show, complete with celebrity interviews and the sensational, confrontational style that characterizes a large segment of that genre (Cooper, 2011b).

Cooper is not alone. His British colleague Piers Morgan has been a Fleet Street newspaper editor and a judge on *Britain's Got Talent*. Katie Couric, too, moved from lighter morning fare to CBS Nightly News anchor that also did regular celebrity interviews. And there is the traditional fact of celebrity that has always attended the television news anchor, from Walter Cronkite to Dan Rather to Canada's Lloyd Robertson. Even a hardened newsman like David Carr of the *New York Times* becomes a celebrity as the protagonist of the 2011 documentary *Page One* (Rossi, 2011), about the newspaper swimming hard to catch the new media wave that threatens to swamp print journalism. Canadian journalists Adrienne Clarkson and Michaelle Jean both served as Governor General, Canada's nominal head of state, and a handful of news people have been appointed to the country's Senate. Leonardo DiCaprio raised the hackles of many a journalist in 2000 when he conducted a news interview with then-president Bill Clinton for ABC News (Bishop, 2004). There is a long history of crossover between journalism, entertainment and politics (Marshall, 2006b).

Academics and politicians host their own news-talk programs. Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee has a Saturday show on Fox News and former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, who resigned amid a prostitution scandal in 2008, used a stint on CNN in part to rehabilitate his image. Former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin played host on Fox News and also landed a spot shooting wild animals on her own reality show on TLC. Meanwhile, political science professor Melissa

Harris-Perry of Tulane University guest hosted for both Rachel Maddow and Lawrence O'Donnell of MSNBC and began a weekend program on the network in early 2012. She is routinely a "contributor" to MSNBC, which means that news-talk hosts also interview her about political news. Medical doctor Sanjay Gupta is a CNN correspondent who goes into war zones. All the while, journalists interview politicians, celebrities, business leaders, military figures, academics and, increasingly, other journalists.

This crossover of roles is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon. It influences our conceptions of expertise and legitimacy, and raises concomitant questions about power and representation. While scholars and news people continue to debate what counts as journalism and who qualifies as a journalist (cf. Deuze, 2005; Zelizer, 2004), the fact is that news, entertainment and other popular cultural forms are blended in the public mind (cf. Baym 2005; Bennett and Entman, 2001). News satire or "fake news" as Jon Stewart has called it, is as much a part of social-political discourse as is newspaper journalism and the nightly news (Day, 2011; Compton, 2011; Baym 2005). All forms of culture, not just news, have always shaped political discourse (Edelman, 1995). But journalists, academics and political actors alike guard what counts as news (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Those walls, constructed along artificial demarcation lines, have been crumbling amid a vast media landscape that is ever more fragmented and niche oriented. One need look no further than the classroom to see how students seamlessly, and sometimes very skillfully, traverse the boundaries of news, satire, music, talk shows, and video games in discussing their ideas about cultural production.

The celebrification of governmental politics is an aspect of these vocational crossings, though governing is an area of democratic life that, in an ideal sense, purports

to be above the fray of the market. The persona of consumer has typically been set in contrast to that of citizen; the former is said to be self-interested while the latter implies communality and civic responsibility. In fact, this is one of the distinctions that journalism has tried to make to distinguish its work from that of other culture industries though there has probably never been such a clear distinction between citizen and consumer. The category of consumer-citizen dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the notion of pure citizenship is an ideal, not a reality (Cohen, 2001). The market has always encroached upon the newsroom too and increasingly so since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Doug Underwood (2001) argues. Yet, the lore of a firewall between journalism as a business and journalism as a civic calling remains a strong part of the professional mythology of the craft (cf. Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), and a part of the mythical distinction between citizen and consumer identities.

A wide range of scholarship gives treatment to the implications of our subjectivity as consumer-citizens, from the structural to the post-structural, the critical to the functionalist, from cultural studies to media effects research. Media and cultural studies have a longstanding debate about the influence of popular culture on the political public sphere. On the one hand is a dystopic view that the focus on entertainment, and the related “tabloidization” of news, is stunting the deliberative spaces of democracy (cf. Boorstin, 1972; Postman, 1985; Parenti, 1992; Couldry & Markham, 2007). Couldry and Markham, for example, use survey data to argue that people steeped in celebrity culture are least engaged in politics and least likely to use social media for political aims. Others view popular culture as having great potential to democratize what has historically been a hegemonically bourgeois white, heterosexual male bastion (cf. Fiske, 1989a, 1989b;

van Zoonen, 2005). Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) suggests that some popular culture is, in fact “entertaining the citizen,” modelling engaged civic life through television, music and other popular genres. This popular representation, she suggests, contributes to citizen identity and fosters engagement.

The fact of celebrity politicians is not new. Adolf Hitler, Margaret Thatcher, Mao Zedong, John F. Kennedy, Pierre Trudeau and Edi Amin and were each famous (or infamous). Yet celebrity has become almost a condition of higher office in some democracies. Politicians as different as Vladimir Putin, Nicolas Sarkozy and Silvio Berlusconi have, or had, a recognition factor inside and outside their countries. In addition to the often-mentioned Ronald Reagan, who became the best known of entertainment celebrities to seek high political position, the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, Al Franken, Britain’s Glenda Jackson and Australian musician Peter Garrett have also run for office. Famous politicians have a media afterlife too. They remain good “gets” for news interviews, charities, awards shows, and so on. Al Gore is a famous example of a politician who used his renown to make an Oscar-winning documentary film in his post-political life.

In the Obama era, America is a Petri dish for the experiment with ultra-famous people whose public lives directly influence democratic policies and perspectives, and whose private lives are fair game. Today’s star politicians are somehow both larger than life and closer than ever. Kennedy ushered in a new age of political glamour in the 1960s, but one that fastidiously maintained the “aura” of uniqueness, as Walter Benjamin (2006) called it. He dined with members of the press corps, a group of largely white men who kept his philandering ways safely walled off from the columns of type and miles of

celluloid they used to construct his public persona. Today, all bets are off. Journalists, bloggers, hackers and Wikileaks expose all manner of political and salacious detail. Politics is entertainment and politicians perform as celebrities. Cable news, talk shows, and the internet feed the 24-hour news cycle.

From within this maelstrom of publicity the Sarah Palin phenomenon emerged as viable political alternative in the U.S. Her high-wattage celebrity burned bright in the glow of digital media, though her star has faded at this writing. It is ironic that the John McCain presidential campaign produced ads in 2008 that derided Obama's celebrity, visually comparing him with the likes of Paris Hilton. Now Palin, a half-term governor of Alaska who has become rich selling books, political pith and patriotic folklore in the ensuing years, dispenses her insights via a barrage of 140-character Tweets and carefully orchestrated media events. She targets what she calls the "lamestream" media and the liberal elite of Hollywood. Her reality TV series in 2010-11, *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, recorded her ice climbing and shooting guns and juxtaposing "real" America with the effete, elite of the "socialist" left.

The Palin brand grew to include her husband, children and even her daughter's former fiancé. Her daughter Bristol turned the apparent sin of single motherhood into celebrity and wealth. She parlayed it into a gig on *Dancing with the Stars*, an awkward PSA on sexual abstinence with Jersey Shore character "The Situation," a memoir, and multiple speaking engagements. Todd Palin is his wife's closest political advisor, at her side as she anoints or shuns Republican political candidates. Even teenager Willow has garnered attention for the homophobic Facebook flaming of a schoolmate who had dissed her mom's TV show. Levi Johnston, Bristol's estranged "baby daddy," as she calls

him, hired an agent and linked his fortunes to his accidental celebrity grew out of the Palin brand.

The media attributed Obama's success leading up to his election as president in 2008 partly to his use of social media and his ability to reach publics that have often been disengaged or disenfranchised by the existing political order. African Americans, young voters, gays and Latinos are among the demographic groups that responded to his candidacy. He used text-messaging to announce his vice-presidential running mate, and in the process skillfully gathered hundreds of thousands of supporters' mobile phone numbers. He became an international celebrity and a hero in many predominantly non-white countries around the world, including in some Muslim countries because of his childhood years in Indonesia (cf. Miller, 2007; Nagourney, 2008).

Political celebrities are caught up in the vocational crossing that contributes to blended notions of celebritized authority among those who produce and consume cultural content, including news. Political figures often garner publicity nowadays via the same channels as do other celebrities. Beginning with Bill Clinton's use of newsmagazine and late night talk shows in 1992 to woo voters and refute stories of his philandering ways (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001), politicians have been as likely to appear on Oprah, Jay Leno or Jon Stewart as on *Meet the Press* or in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. They now have Twitter feeds and Facebook profiles and all manner of direct access to the voting public. Importantly for my own research, entertainment celebrities also routinely use their fame to gain access to government leaders, a crossing that further celebritizes politics.

For these reasons, my research project considers news as an aspect of popular culture, albeit one that has claimed a more explicit role in citizenship than have genres such as music, film and television. News exists alongside news satire and celebrity gossip in the minds of many consumer-citizens. Stewart, Colbert and Canada's Rick Mercer interview top politicians and newsmakers of the day, often asking the tough questions that mainstream news eschews (Day, 2011) Mainstream journalists report on these interviews, and mine other alternative media sources for news content. This cross-pollination suggests their traditional agenda-setting role has shifted. News, as Piers Morgan stated in the quote at the top of this chapter, "comes in many guises." Sometimes it is indeed just "good old-fashioned entertainment" (Bernstein, 2011). But in whatever form, whatever guise, it has tremendous social force. That is the point of an inquiry into the nature and impact of celebritized social-political life.

### **Iterations of Celebrity**

Celebrity as a dynamic phenomenon is at once a discourse, a commodity, a lifestyle, a source of power and system of containment. It acts as a kind of mediation, a shorthand reference for many aspects of our lives. Celebrities as individuals are brands, commodities, role models and of course they sometimes serve as pariahs and cautionary tales (Turner, 2004; Marshall, 1997; Bell, 2010; Sternheimer, 2010; Giles, 1999). They are mediated "cultural fabrications" as Chris Rojek (2001, p. 10) suggests. They trade on uniqueness, but of a sort that is reproducible within culture industries such as film, television, and music. Celebrities must be different enough to be interesting but conformist enough not to be seen as threatening or subversive (Braudy, 1986, pp. 5-8).

The media do not warm to “cage-rattling” celebrities such as Sean Penn or Jane Fonda, for example, whom they deem to be overly political and difficult (Hollar, 2007). They are part of the machinery of cultural production and there are expectations about their compliance with its norms. In Marxian terms, they are congealed labour (Dyer, 1986), used in conjunction with production labour to make cultural commodities. They are drivers of consumer capitalism who promote all manner of products and services, either directly endorsing consumer brands or as ‘thought leaders’ in the production of lifestyle that drives the economy of wealthy societies.

Celebrity is synonymous with the notion of individuality and personal freedom that is pervasive in consumer societies, particularly in the United States. It embodies the American Dream myth of social mobility and racial and class equality (Sternheimer, 2010). Celebrity is a form of symbolic capital that trades on a human impulse to flee from our own “insignificance,” to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (1991, pp. 72-76). And celebrity, as an institutional source of power embodied in individuals, has an organizing quality in our lives (Marshall, 1997). While it represents individuality, celebrity has communitarian potential as it conjures audiences and publics; it is also the product of an audience or public.

For the sake of this discussion it is useful to distinguish between types of ‘well-knownness’. I deploy David Giles’s (1999) definition of fame. Though it might not stand up completely in the era of digital media, it still serves as a heuristic model from which to discuss renown, which is the term Chris Rojek (2001) uses for the same concept. Fame, for Giles, can be transient, fleeting and/or localized. One can be ‘famous’ in a particular field and not have the wider renown to be a celebrity, as with people who are

names in their profession, sorority, academic discipline or even elementary school playground. People do, in some cases, convert fame to celebrity, which is a more transcendent state in which one is catapulted to recognition in a wider context. Celebrity has a durability and reach that Giles's notion of fame does not have. This form of renown and all that attends it, including the idea that it is achieved and not conferred, is possible only in the context of mass communication and a diffuse audience.

Celebrities are famous, in Giles's definition, but not all famous people are celebrities. A number of other scholars have endeavoured to typologize well-knownness. Celebrity carries with it an enduring quality. But not all public figures achieve an orbit of wide renown, and people can pass in and out of fame, sometimes almost within 15 minutes as Andy Warhol once suggested when he said: "In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" (Kaplan, 1992). Fame is a state of being or a process. Celebrity can be all of these things, but it is also a discourse, a commodity and even a framework around which we organize our lives to some degree.

James Monaco's early (1978) typology of celebrity distinguished between 'hero', 'star' and the 'quasar.' The hero has a notable accomplishment, as with sports or military figure who exhibits personal skills or talents. Stars are known for who they are, such as film actors, musicians or others who are well-known enough in the media to be 'personalities.' Quasars are known for who we think they are, according to Monaco. Here he means people who attain fame not of their own making, who get pulled into the spotlight by the media for either positive or negative reasons. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Inc., or Judge Lance Ito, who presided over the O. J. Simpson murder trial in the 1990s might fall under the quasar category.

Rojek (2001) categorizes celebrity according to slightly different but related types: ascribed, achieved and attributed. Ascribed celebrity is that which is owing to birthright or lineage, as with royalty. People attain achieved celebrity through personal effort, as with a sports star. Attributed celebrity can also stem from personal achievement, but it is, in Rojek's view, a direct product of the electronic media age. It is a type of celebrity that is only possible through mass representation as with television personalities and, more recently, people who are famous for being famous. Rojek identifies what he calls the "celtoid," people who briefly achieve fame. These are whistle blowers, mistresses, and others who come and go, some with intentionality and others more accidentally, like Monaco's quasars. Rojek calls celebrity in general "the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere," where glamour is favourable and notoriety is unfavourable (p. 10). We measure our worth in relation to people we have never met, Rojek argues, and this has an indelible impact on the public consciousness.

For one thing, individual stars' affective power constitutes itself as a form of expertise in the media. Institutions and/or the culture industries, including journalism, back their legitimacy as people with sanctioned knowledge. That connection aids in the construction of a particular audience attraction based on glamour and on distance, what Walter Benjamin called the cult of the movie star (2006, p. 261). The industry constructs an "aura" to establish emotional links with the audience. The celebrity and industry together construct the "aura" in a negotiated relationship with the audience. Stars are ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. They share what appear to be their private selves and yet their distance and glamour is part of their cachet.

The blending of public and private becomes important to how celebrities become perceived as experts on social issues. I explore celebrities as expert sources of information on Africa in Chapters 2 and 4, and look at, for example, how Madonna incorporates her adoption of two children from Malawi into her framework for philanthropy. Publicity of the private is essential to that dual sense that the star is accessible and knowable, yet also enigmatic and just beyond reach. Marshall (1997) argues that this form of celebrity is a conduit and an organizing force for the non-rational, affective domain of society. It relies on a valorization of the individual and at the same time a celebrity's value depends upon the collective attachment of the audience or public. The use of the private, at least a version of it constructed for public consumption, is a key aspect of celebrities' legitimacy and performance as activists.

With these definitions in mind, I turn to two modalities of celebrity as they relate to activism and social causes that I take up in later chapters. I broadly delineate them as 'industry' and 'everyday' celebrity. As mentioned, media industries help produce celebrities as representatives of prevalent ideas. Their power as a form of symbolic capital, and as a container for social order, lies primarily in the reciprocal three-way relationship with audience and culture industry. Industry celebrities are a "negotiated terrain of significance," (Marshall, 1997, p. 47), in discourses of race, class, gender and other social categories, and of lifestyle and globalization. The second modality, though not exclusive of the first, trades on the everyday celebritization of our lives. It relies on social networking and other new media platforms, and produces a flattening of the hierarchical nature of access and expertise in the media industries. Culture industry celebrities certainly partake of this mode of publicity as well. But online/social media

are the primary outlet for the emerging forms of celebrity and lifestyle performance. The phenomenon of new-media-enabled celebrity begs new questions about our identities as social actors and citizen-consumers, and about the potential for the performance of fame to produce expertise and authoritative knowledge.

### **Industrial Celebrity as Model for Identification and Social Engagement**

While entertainment celebrities have been active in social causes for years—Danny Kaye’s UNICEF work in the 1950s and Audrey Hepburn’s in the 1980s are prime examples—the heightened celebrity-media culture means that the ‘event’ created by the presence of a big name can attract swirl of attention from old and new media alike, from both hard news and entertainment reporters. Bono’s visit to a head of state prompts political journalists, paparazzi and bloggers to highlight AIDS and developing-world debt. Actors such as Jolie, Cheadle and Clooney can visit war-torn Sudan and guarantee a clutch of cameras will follow. Oprah brought a loyal audience to education and women’s rights when she opened a school for girls in South Africa in 2007. Madonna brings glitz—and always controversy—to her work in Malawi. As audiences we consume celebrity and the aspects of social life that they embrace. We consume individual celebrities whose lives and personas we track and sometimes emulate. And celebrities produce and consume the audience, feeding on attention and deriving power from it. The mass media also produce and consume both celebrity and audience; if the audience is the main power supply for fame, the mass media are both a transformer and a conduit.

Yet celebrities are also brands. They are for sale, and not just as creative workers in the cultural industries, for as we know some are simply famous for being famous.

They endorse products, services, causes and each other. As brands in their own right, they have the synergistic ability to bring cache' and monetary value to other brands, including people. They give emotional meaning to what is essentially a cold, hard exchange relationship, as Celia Lury (2004) calls it. They embody and animate the affective side of consumption. We are meant to fall in love with the product, the people promoting it, and with ourselves. The intensity of branding as a form of celebritization cannot be overstated. It important to my arguments in Chapter 3, where I take up in detail what it means to have celebrities brand important global issues as a way of securing an emotional foothold with their audience.

As celebrities deploy their brand, even for a good cause, they market identity and Western lifestyle. In wealthy societies with a large consumer class, lifestyle becomes a manifestation of our daily choices and consumption patterns (Giddens, 1991, p. 80-88). Of course choice does not mean that all lifestyle choices are open to everyone. Socio-economic location is a hugely limiting influence. But lifestyle is a "functional response" to modernity in Western society, one that is organized explicitly around consumption (Chaney, 1996, p. 11). In much of the world we identify with particular practices and routines, from political affiliation to dress, food choices and cultural practices, in order to help define who we are. In other words lifestyle is an exclusionary discourse.

All of our identities are constructed through difference and exclusion. Identities, Stuart Hall says, "can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected" (1996, pp. 4-5). The simultaneous belonging and exclusion in the highly mediated power relation that is

identity construction has deep social/political implications. We narrate our own identities:

but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field (Hall, 1996, p. 4).

Our identities are both a fiction and a lived reality, then. Celebrity is a discourse around which we construct identity in fantasy, and a way in which we materialize it. We purchase the products that fulfill the fantasy and attach us to a feeling of inclusion, of being part of something, that consumer capitalism tells us can be bought.

The Product RED campaign, a primary case for my inquiries in Chapters 2 and 3, is an example of how famous people deploy their brands to construct and legitimate discourses of belonging, individuality, and need across celebrity charity work in ways that are fundamental to the marketing of consumer goods (cf. Heath & Potter, 2004; Frank 1997). Product RED, as well as other campaigns I take up, sells goods and lifestyle by delineating and branding difference. Celebrity philanthropy such as RED is shot through with discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality whether celebrities are 'performing' their personal lives before the news and entertainment media, producing creative output, or responding to social issues. From Hurricane Katrina to the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, to conditions in the so-called Third World,<sup>3</sup> we come to know and believe what we do about other people, often based on classed and racialized

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<sup>3</sup> Again following Young's (1990, pp. 11-12) discussion of the terms First and Third World as I noted in the Introduction.

perspectives that people with cultural authority, including celebrities, articulate and that the mass media take up uncritically. As Hall suggests, “Race is the modality in which class is lived” (1978, p. 394). Celebrity in every context speaks to the material reality of class and race relations globally.

Africa has attracted enormous celebrity attention in terms of international causes. The rich and famous traverse the continent using their fame to turn the world’s gaze on the continent. Their efforts have helped raise money and visibility for a multitude of causes, including AIDS, environmental issues and weather-related disasters, human rights, education for girls, landmines and micro-lending. Madonna and Hollywood star couple Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have themselves adopted children. Actor Emma Thompson adopted a teenaged former child soldier. Madonna pledged, and then cancelled her plans, to build a school for girls through her charity site *Raising Malawi* (Madonna, n.d.), in the country where she adopted her son David and a daughter, Mercy. Jolie travelled to Namibia to give birth to her daughter Shiloh. She has adopted children from Cambodia, Ethiopia and Vietnam. All such cases become media events, and “racial projects” (Omi & Winant, 1994) that create discourses about Africa, its children and international adoption in general, and of course about celebrity and the stars themselves.

Celebrity itself is a racial project. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) argue that racial projects—everything from government programs to charities, political campaigns, judicial decisions, news and popular culture—“are the building blocks not just of racial formation, but of hegemony in general” (p. 68). Racial formations are a dynamic process through which racial categories are built up, transformed and broken down over time. Racial projects are essentially the vehicles or

containers for those processes. The news media, which heavily publicize celebrity interventions, are an aspect of racial projects and of the contemporary racial formation generally.

One of the common racialized themes throughout celebrity work in Africa, I argue, is a universal narrative of human oneness that does not mention race but that makes it an ever-present essence. Essentializing race involves a “denial, or flattening, of differences” in representations of particular groups, as Omi and Winant (1996) said. Universality is a key feature, for example, on the Product RED website and on news coverage of Bono and the campaign. The fact that RED explicitly sidesteps race, and its political-economic context, is part of its work as a racial project that also commodifies and consumes race.

The universalizing language that replaces race requires the seeming erasure of difference, a rhetorical move that abstracts people and diverse cultures. “People are often unable to take the sufferings of those close to them,” as Susan Sontag (2003, p. 99) has written. The picture, on television, the internet or elsewhere, is about as close as we can get and still maintain the language of universality that supposedly transcends all and enables us to believe that “what we have in common is more important than our interesting differences,” as Bill Clinton once said about Africa (Rissman, 2009). The celebrity is perfectly situated to be the rhetor of that language which, some argue is derived from a politics of pity rather than of justice (Littler, 2008).

Identity construction related to celebrity work in Africa, then, is far more complex than the simple “helping” narrative on its surface. When Bono, Oprah or Angelina Jolie turn their attention to Africa they are part of a discourse of race, gender, class, as well as

of contemporary capitalism, citizenship, lifestyle, and globalization. Their interventions are an aspect of their own identity formation as well as for their fans and for people in Africa. Indeed the identity of the so-called First World depends on its power relationship with the Other (Said, 2003/1978). If identities are constructed through difference and their capacity to exclude as Hall suggests, then we need explore the ways in which celebrity media publicity constructs both celebrity and fan or consumer within and against the identities they fashion for the distant Others.

### **Celebrity in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Lifestyle and Grassroots Advocacy**

Digital media and social networking have helped create the conditions for a form of celebrity that germinates outside of conventional media channels. Marshall (2006) argues that new media “hail” us differently than even television and film, producing a new subjectivity based on publicizing the self. We live in a moment that offers multiple outlets for the performance of our blended public-private lives. Many of us have a semi-public presence on social networking sites such as FaceBook and Twitter, where we perform for our “friends,” and “followers” by uploading content, or becoming a “fan” of all things personal, political and commercial. People use both online and offline platforms—YouTube, Twitter, *American Idol*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Jersey Shore* and more—to break through the threshold of obscurity. For example, struggling 20-something writer Justin Halpern moved back into his parents’ home a few years ago and began posting “Shit My Dad Says” to a Twitter account, basically funny, off-colour witticisms from his 70-something father. Suddenly his list of followers began to grow and before he knew it he had more than 500,000 (Halperin, n.d.). A book deal followed and he

produced a CBS sitcom called “Stuff My Dad Says” starring William Shatner. (It was cancelled after one season, despite having decent ratings). Global pop phenomenon Justin Bieber became famous when a talent agent spotted him on YouTube and introduced him to the recording artist Usher. For Bieber, Halperin and countless others, fame appears to be more possible, if not more probable, than it once did.

Alice Marwick (2010) calls the renown based in the creation and sharing of online personas “micro-celebrity,” a concept that I deploy in Chapter 4. It conjures something of the same celebrity-fan relationship that exists with culture industry fame. Social media, Marwick argues, “has transformed celebrity from something a person is to something a person does” (pp. 13-14). Following Rojek (2001), she distinguishes between achieved and ascribed micro-celebrity. Achieved celebrity is the result of purposeful publicizing of oneself, for example posting self-made music videos and performances on YouTube. Ascribed micro-celebrity is assigned to certain people because of the celebrity publicity about them that they do not initiate and may not want.

We can place those who experience the side effects of the publicity afforded by social media into this latter category. People’s online tweets and social media bleatings come back to haunt as never before with earlier platforms. It can be much tougher for public figures, or any of us for that matter, to get clear of impolitic remarks, racism, or embarrassing photos that circulate in cyberspace. Former U.S. congressman Anthony Wiener’s dramatic downfall in 2011 after he Tweeted sexual pictures of himself is perhaps one of the most widely known to date. Arkansas school board member Clint McCance resigned after it was revealed that his Facebook page contained hateful remarks urging “fags” to commit suicide (Wing, 2010). Michigan assistant attorney

general Andrew Shirvell's obsessive anti-gay diatribe against a university student union president made prominent use of social media. He was eventually fired and lawsuits are still pending at this writing (Jesse, 2012).

Online media are equally a place for the infamous. Fame-seeker Richard Heene used his family members as pawns in a scheme to get a reality TV show. He launched a home-made weather balloon and recorded it escaping its moorings, pretending that his five-year-old son was inside. The result was a dramatic and expensive police search, a young son who forgot his 'lines' in the staged tragedy, and eventually criminal charges (Banda, 2009). Leo Braudy would argue that this behaviour on a relatively new platform for publicity is a natural development owing to an innate human desire to be known and recognized (1986, p 5-6, p. 587). Certainly this iteration of 'everyday' celebrity, which valorizes uniqueness while patterning conformity, enabling closeness and distance simultaneously, is a contemporary phenomenon that further confounds the distinction between public and private.

Online media are not just a place for the banal performance of everyday celebrity or a catapult into the culture industries. They also constitute a site where different modalities of celebrity come together and mingle in interesting ways. Aside from being important to the production and reproduction of fame, social actors can use the discursive space of the internet to push issues onto the social agenda. It is a relatively new doorway to publicity that has potential for grassroots advocacy from all ideological corners. On the progressive side, social media has also been a boon to political organizers large and small. At a grassroots level, for example, a Facebook campaign called *Let Constance take her girlfriend to the prom* emerged in 2010 when a lesbian high

school senior in Mississippi was excluded from her graduation prom because of her same-sex relationship (McMillan, 2010). Mainstream and alternative media picked up on the story as the high-school senior pursued her case with the school board, the judicial system and other avenues of publicity.

Just as with more conventional modes of celebrity, journalism can play a role in the cultivation of micro-celebrity, the online performance of self to an audience. It can enable a kind of vocational crossing into other media roles and genres. Journalists' professional social media presence, for example, is sometimes different than what they produce for their home news organization. Ben Wedeman of CNN provided the expected 'objective' journalistic perspective on the Egyptian revolution during his television reports in early 2011. His Tweets, however included newsy live happenings, emotional support for the protesters in Tahrir square and editorial opinion. On Jan. 31, 2011, he wrote that he had seen no evidence of radical Islamic politics in Cairo. "It's not there, armchair 'terrorism' experts. Move on," he tweeted (Wedeman, n.d.). He, like many in the media, departs somewhat from that objective stance in social media. Still, media outlets sometime discipline journalists for stepping over the boundaries of acceptable commentary on social media. CNN fired Octavia Nasr for Tweeting her sadness at the death of a Hezbollah leader in 2010 (Bauder, 2010).

One of the most prominent recent examples of the successful use of online media and celebrity is the *It Gets Better* campaign, which I take up in Chapter 4. Seattle journalist and sex columnist Dan Savage started the project, which deals with gay rights and homophobic bullying of LGBT youth in the United States. Savage, known to readers of alternative publications across North America, began the campaign in late 2010 and it

quickly spread on the internet as people and groups added their own videos to the site. Celebrities, politicians and anonymous individuals, gay and straight, have created videos about the challenges of growing up queer. Some of the videos are funny, others heartwarming or sad but most contain a positive message about the eventual rewards of life, and they encourage struggling youth to endure in the face of intolerance. Many of the celebrity videos encourage young people to find trustworthy adults to confide in.

The campaign raises a number of questions relevant to this research. It speaks to the evolving nature of influence and expertise and how it is entwined with moral authority and legitimacy in digital life. As I will argue, the project is a major contributor to the debate about sexual orientation and sexual equality generally, both in the U.S. and more broadly. *It Gets Better* is a good example of the blended nature of celebrity in new media environments and the role of mainstream news media in amplifying online fame. Savage's fame jumpstarted the project, and many other well-known people, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, give it mainstream appeal. But thousands of other individuals and groups have contributed videos, and not without impact. A number of U.S. states adopted anti-bullying laws, including in New Jersey where the legislation expressly gives protection to members of the LGBT community (Senate & General Assembly, 2011).

### **Celebrity as Everyday Life/style**

The above discussion suggests that the whole social phenomenon of celebrity is shifting. Fame is a lifestyle in Euro-American societies, one that crosses in and out of institutional boundaries of the culture industries, politics and everyday social

interaction. The prominent online publication *Gawker* promises “Gossip from Manhattan and the Beltway to Hollywood and the Valley” (Gawker, n.d.). People can track their online connections’ every move via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, or follow friends’ and acquaintances’ eating, socializing, shopping, drinking and other banal routines, something Marwick (2010) calls “lifestreaming.” Turner (2010) argues that the media have become the authors of modern identity with their “demotic” turn toward publicizing “ordinary” people on television, online, and elsewhere. Certainly the warp speed of contemporary media celebrity bolsters the American Dream mythology that we are all standouts (cf. Sternheimer, 2011, Weber, 2009). The ideology of individualism, and its implications for subordinated groups, thrives alongside the opening up of cultural authority.

Reality TV, a cheap and popular genre in the current political economy of the corporate mass media, provides both a container and an impetus for the contemporary notion that we all can be famous, and possibly rich. The proliferation of programming, from competition-oriented challenge shows to makeover TV to the drama of 20-something singles living together and partying it up, opened new venues for “everyday” or “ordinary” (Turner, 2010; Lewis, 2008) celebrity to emerge from the banality and angst of daily life. Yet, the possibility of enduring fame may in fact remain as elusive as ever. Turner suggests, for example, that the reality TV practice of producing “ordinary” talent amounts to vertical integration. In other words the production of a dramatized version of people’s everyday lives is a matter of taking control of the entire production and distribution chain, producing their lives as media products and distributing them on TV (2004, pp 52-53). So while fame may be the goal of the contestants in this scenario,

from the media industry perspective it is simply an incidental by-product when it does happen. Never the less, the culture industries package and promote this desire for fame and its material trappings as part of their control of the production and supply chain.

Celebrity is a lifestyle in a number of senses beyond the sheer possibility of fame. For one, we live our lives in relationship with the incessant media spectacle that is contemporary Western culture (Turner, 2010; Kellner, 2003). Everyday life itself is a kind of performance and the line between our private and public selves blurs, saturated with celebritized models for 'doing' our lives in public. We emulate and reject heroes, fashions, beliefs and ways of being in the world partly via our celebritized culture. It seems everything from the ordering of lattes to the cupcake craze are part of this performance. Some people are compelled to bring that everyday performance of self to a larger stage, striving for fame via the newer channels of publicity. "Individual self-consciousness about performance is unavoidable, Braudy says. "Our beings have taken on a deep dye from the media romance with the eye" (1986, p. 587). Individuals carry on this romance, performing for a multitude of reasons, some more narcissistic, some more altruistic.

The performance of celebrity as everyday life contributes to the vocational crossings I discussed earlier and to the blending of different aspects of peoples' lives. Work and home life, public and private, commerce and citizenship have little distinction in the current mediatized mode of capitalism. Gilles Deleuze uses the construct of the "control society" (1990) to explain the ways in which contemporary life is blended as never before. One does not continually start over or perform separate roles, as with the home, school and job, rather "you never finish anything—business, training, and military

service being coexisting metastable states of a single modulation” (p. 179). He calls this crossing “[a] sort of universal transmutation” (1990, p. 179). Home and work are not separate from each other or from other roles we perform and these blended existences are lifestyle.

Deleuze suggested that contemporary life has ceased to be a disciplinary society, as Foucault (1977) would have it, where different aspects of the social world are discreet, enclosed containers organized by the industrial phase of capitalism. The family was an enclosure separate from the factory, separate from the school, the church and so on, all in line with capitalism’s need for rationalized efficiency for industrial production. The discreet enclosures of life were akin to the Fordist assembly line, where different aspects were cut off from one another in the same way that a worker saw only his or her piece of the production process. In Deleuze’s control society, with the industrial phase of capitalism at an end in wealthy countries, all aspects of life meld together.

This is an interesting distinction in terms of identity and public consciousness. The vocational crossings I discussed are an outgrowth of the control society, of the continual performance of self in different ways at different times, as I take up in Chapter 4. It is not just a blending of public and private spheres but of different aspects of publicness enabled by both online and traditional electronic media, and by the crossover in expertise and in news with other cultural production. Expertise has become a lifestyle. It reaches into our homes and into every aspect of our daily lives. The discussion about iterations of celebrity and about the melding of public and private is relevant to the evolving nature of expertise in the context of the mass media.

## **Modalities of Expertise**

The study of expertise as a legitimating rhetoric cuts across disciplinary boundaries, from management and business to political science, organizational and professional studies, journalism, cultural studies, and more. For this project, I argue for two general modalities of expertise, one a product of modernity and one emerging more recently from within the contemporary mass media. The two are not mutually exclusive. One is the traditional expertise that was part of the rationalization of knowledge, learning and other social processes that grew out of the Enlightenment. The other has been called “lifestyle,” “ordinary” or “popular” expertise (Lewis, 2008), which flows from television, lifestyle magazines and online platforms. This latter category includes lifestyle gurus such as Martha Stewart and the cast of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Collins, 2003-2007). It is within this modality of cultural authority that we find the celebrity activist, as I will discuss later. First, I offer a thumbnail history of the expert cultural authority as context for thinking about the celebrization of social issues.

### **Objectivity And The Creation Of The Expert**

The valorization of science and rationality beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century meant that credibility and legitimacy began to emerge from social locations other than inherited title. The credentialed expert is a child of the Enlightenment, along with liberal democracy, the organization and documentation of social processes and institutions, and the rise of professionalism. The more complex, knowledge-based, rationalized world presented a conundrum for the expert as democracy flourished; it asked more of citizens. Stephen Turner (2003) points out that in a sense democracy and expertise are at odds;

one requires generalized knowledge, the other specialized. “One assumption of meaningful discussion is some degree of mutual comprehension. But in the case of expert knowledge, there is very often no such comprehension and no corresponding ability to judge what is being said and who is saying it, and consequently no possibility of genuine ‘discussion’” (p. 12). Expert knowledge has to be synthesized for the public, in this view. This has long been an important function of journalism and is an important role of celebrity in the current moment.

Even Walter Lippmann, a journalist, found liberal democracy unrealistic in its expectation that average citizens be “omnicompetent,” able to express a rational, considered opinion on every issue. His highly non-populist answer was the “disinterested expert” who would essentially translate knowledge to compensate for this perceived lack in the citizenry. He said the press could not ultimately be expected to place its fourth-estate role above its economic imperative as a money-making venture (p. 203). And he suggested that most citizens are lazy; they like to be spoon-fed and political leaders are adept at the “manufacture of consent” (p. 158). They know, he argued, that building consensus is not about rational agreement on issues of the day but about finding symbols onto which people can latch their beliefs (p. 132).

This tension around civic engagement is at the heart of the present research. It is important to questions of representation and voice, and how accepted ideas are communicated and reformed. People deploy and challenge valorized knowledge in all manner of ways, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, to reinscribe and challenge hegemonic ideas about the pressing social issues of our day. Sanctioned knowledge is intimately bound up with power and with representations of race, gender, class,

sexuality and the processes of globalization. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the tension between participation and the role of expert knowledge is at the centre of public life in the digital era. Certainly what counts as both knowledge and truth is highly fragmented and balkanized in contemporary political discourse, for better and for worse. Digital technologies alter, although not eliminate, those tensions. They enable a flattening of expertise as they also make available knowledge formerly made available exclusively in elite circles.

Scholarship offers many entry points into the discussion of what expert knowledge is, how it evolved in modernity and how it functions in the current moment. For the purposes of an inquiry into the mass media, cultural authority, fame and identity, one logical place to turn is to the concept of objectivity. It developed across the sciences and social sciences, and in journalism, as a way of communicating “disinterested” expertise to a wider public. It is important because it has been central to legitimizing the expert and it still functions in profound but sometimes less obvious ways in 21<sup>st</sup>-century media discourse.

The contemporary notion of objectivity as a detached “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986) has seeped into the public consciousness. It is not uncommon to hear people speak colloquially of a news report not being objective, or of some popular representation events as being more objective than another. The idea of contemporary objectivity is synonymous with the factual, the scientific, the impartial and “the cold-blooded restraint of the emotions” (Daston, 1992, p. 598). And it has social force, as Lorraine Daston says, “in the sense of compelling assent from all rational minds, be they lodged in human, Martian, or angelic bodies; and for the 'really real', that is to say,

objects in themselves independent of all minds except, perhaps, that of God.” Objectivity became, in modernity, an inoculation against critique. It drove an artificial wedge between emotion and rationality and set up the latter as the source of credibility (Daston, 1992).

Even the meaning of the term “objectivity” has shifted over time. In the medieval period the objective and the subjective meant almost the opposite of today’s definitions (Ward, 2004, p. 15). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the word “objective” referred to a mental object thrown up by the mind (Dear, 1992). Similarly, In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the word “objective” meant what was perceived and was distinguishable from “real.” Daston (1992) argues it had “little or nothing to do with emotional detachment, restraint from judgment, method and measurement or empirical reliability” and that subjectivity “had yet to become a matter for regret or reproach” (pp. 602-03). What became this immutable notion of “aperspectival” objectivity has its roots in aesthetics and moral philosophy (Daston, 1992, p. 606). Only when it took hold in the sciences did it become a synonym for the empirically provable or factual (p. 597), in opposition to subjectivity and where facts and values can and must be separated. This discourse has had vast subordinating and exclusionary consequences for less privileged groups, as I will discuss further. Indeed scholars as diverse as Michel Foucault and Gayatri Spivak have spent their lives excavating subordinated ways of knowing from this Enlightenment claim on knowledge.

“Aperspectival” objectivity was essentially deployed as a communication tool for validating expert scientific knowledge beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. It bridged the tension between specialized and generalized knowledge that Turner (2003) argues is inherent in liberal democracy. It was part of a reorganization and codification of

scientific life into formal groupings, such as laboratories and commissions. “Indeed, the essence of a perspectival objectivity is communicability, narrowing the range of genuine knowledge to coincide with that of public knowledge. In the extreme case, a perspectival objectivity may even sacrifice deeper or more accurate knowledge to the demands of communicability” (Daston, 1992, p. 600). Objectivity, in this sense, is at the crux of the divide between the credentialed expert and the citizen in democratic life.

These are important points because they speak about the professionalization of knowledge and how it governs the ability to communicate and justify that knowledge. This history is also relevant because journalism was grappling with objectivity at the same moment as were academic disciplines and other professions. It was an overarching professionalizing move in western liberal democracies. Objectivity was just the right tool for an Enlightenment belief in progress, rationality, science, and hard, factual knowledge (Furner, 1975).

The rise of professionalism helped solidify the positivist agenda in the social sciences, and it did so as well in journalism. The social sciences were actually the project of a reform-minded aristocracy and an educated middle class (Smith, 1994; Ross, 1991; Furner, 1975). The reformers’ aim was to reach people affected by industrialization. In 1865 the American Social Science Association formed to enable research that could help alleviate terrible social conditions (Smith, p.17; Furner, 1975, pp. 2-3). But with professionalization and its claims to neutrality, the focus shifted from specific victims of social change to general processes affecting society as a whole. Humanitarian goals receded to the background (Smith, pp. 19-24) in the increasing tension between the progressive-era reform-minded social scientists and the professionals. The latter sought

recognition as objective, dispassionate scientists capable of providing disinterested guidance to society's leaders. In the late 1800s the reformers were discredited as unscientific and lacking in objectivity for their dual focus on knowledge and practical application (pp. 31-32). Mark Smith (1994) argues that objectivity served two purposes for professional social scientists: "it distinguished them from suspect political reformers, and it gave them knowledge and methods unavailable to, but accepted by, lay persons" (p. 19). In other words it made them 'disinterested' experts.

This moment marked the gradual "depoliticization" of social science. It meant that people studying the appalling working conditions of industrial capitalism should only observe phenomena, not advocate. As the 'professional' social scientists dropped their claim to moral authority they ensconced themselves as neutral experts who gave authoritative advice on legislative processes. However they did so while speaking on behalf of liberal economic interests (Furner, 1975, p. 39), and with historic ramifications. Apparently 'neutral' political scientists and historians helped produce propaganda in the First World War (Smith, 1994, p. 24). Out of this post-war environment came the rise of public relations and the modern-day spin machine (Ewen, 1996).

The depoliticized legacy of expertise and its use of objectivity as a legitimizing agent still functions in the background of how the media take up social issues. I argue that while contemporary expertise deploys affect as much as rationality, this idea of distance and neutrality still functions—in celebrity campaigns and in journalism about them—to help create a blameless crisis. Media production about celebrity campaigns relies heavily on an emotional connection, with the celebrity and with other brands. Yet such media publicity also creates a sense of celebrity as credentialed expert. It

telegraphs a simple problem-solution narrative that is common to much celebrity work in lieu of a more complex and politically charged political-economy of global social problems.

### **Just the Facts: Media, Sourcing and Credibility**

Journalism followed the sciences and social sciences on their path to depoliticization. Its campaign to be accepted as a profession and its retooling as an enterprise that could stand above the political fray was all part of a drive for legitimacy. The literature traces the North American roots of journalistic objectivity to the U.S. penny press of the 1830s (cf. Schudson, 1978, pp. 12-60; Schiller, 1981, pp. 47-75). They were challengers to the elite six-cent partisan papers of the day. As commercial products, they needed to appear impartial to attract advertisers and readers. As early as 1867, U.S. journalism guides were essentially promoting objectivity as a method (Mirando, 2001). And many of the proscribed traits of contemporary news began to appear: a detachment from party politics, an emphasis on facts and a spare writing style (Mindich, 1998).

Reporters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw themselves as “scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life” (Schudson, 1978, p. 71). Many of them had some scientific training and they were supremely confident in the validity of facts to uncover truth. While the term “objectivity” was common in the academy in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, reporters did not use it routinely until into the 1920s, according to Michael Schudson (p. 120). It was after the horrors of the First World War, when the media’s role as propagandist came under scrutiny, that traditional objectivity became entrenched as a governing ideology and practice. Objectivity was a defensive posture after the glow

had faded from a naïve belief that the world could be understood and reformed solely through empiricism. That period marked the end of a shift from newsman as printer to newsman as journalist (Kelly, 2005); the professionalization was complete. The post-war period saw codes of conduct and statements about objectivity, which for journalists were evidence of their growing professional status (p. 149), just as had been the case with social scientists.

Studies of contemporary journalism have further explored the use of sources as a tool to legitimize mainstream news as “objective.” There is a robust literature on news routines, news content and production, from a variety of perspectives including sociology, political economy, and cultural studies. These writings deal with journalists themselves as experts to some extent, but are more firmly focused on the credibility journalism derives from its selection and deployment of news sources. Both of these aspects relating to authority and expertise are important in contemporary media because they take the debate over who gets to speak, and with what authority, into the realm of celebrity. Much scholarship has looked at how the deployment of expert sources serves the status quo and limits outsider views. The use of experts is part of the professional stance of objectivity described above, wherein journalists interview and quote people with credentials and official titles partly to deflect allegations of bias (cf. Tuchman, 1978, Ericson et al, 1987). And the media paint voices outside of the realm of official sources as less credible, or even unruly or violent (cf. Gitlin, 1980, Hallin 1986). Lance Bennett’s well-known indexing theory (1990), for example, found that the use of “expert” sources is closely related to and bounded by the range of governmental political debate on a given issue. This means that points of view that these sources do not take up

at all tend to be absent from news coverage. Sourcing has been linked to the gatekeeping function of the corporate mainstream media to determine news and frame its terms. Janet Steele (1995), for example, found that the media's use of experts in wartime frames the conflict in a narrow ideological context that emphasizes prognostication, policy and players at the expense of other more broadly analytical frames.

Scholars have critiqued mainstream news as being slavish to elite sources and beholden to corporate interests (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999, 2003; Bagdikian, 2000, Schiller, 1989), blinded by professional norms that mask the selective nature of the news (c.f. Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986), or locked into a stock library of resonant myths (Lule, 2001). Gaye Tuchman (1972) famously argued that the use of sources in news reports is part of the "strategic ritual" of journalistic objectivity. That is, the ability to attribute facts and opinions to a source is a news norm that helps the journalist create a sense of standing outside the story. Journalists plumb the ranks of the academy, politics, the military, think tanks and lobby groups for sources to explain and opine about the issues of the day as they define them. They have a hierarchy of sources (cf. Gans, 1979; Hackett, 1985) that privileges officials but also includes eyewitnesses and "victims" of tragedy, policy or circumstance. They prioritize this latter type of source as well; the poor, homeless, racialized or gendered Others of society are generally less sought after (cf. Domke et al., 2003).

Yet the frenetic new media landscape of news and opinion has played havoc not only with these gatekeeping functions of news, but also with the guarded boundary that distinguishes *news* from *not news*. Scholars have argued that the news media's role in defining what counts as news has changed and even diminished (cf. Shaw & McCombs,

1977). Delli-Carpini and Williams (2001) argue that traditional journalism in fact lost its gatekeeping function during the Clinton-Lewinski sex scandal of the late 1990s.

Alternative media, comedians and other commentators got ahead of the story.

Journalists began interviewing each other with increasing frequency and online media built the story hour by hour. Mainstream news “found that the political agenda was being set without them” and “adapted to the new rules by increasingly mimicking the form and substance of its new media competitors” (p. 174). Now there are many platforms for publicity and new forms of journalism that do not adhere to the professional norms that are deeply entrenched and well documented throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the use of some form of “expert” sources remains a cornerstone of many kinds of media coverage, and for good reason. Experts bring legitimacy.

The highly mediatised public sphere, of which celebrity and online media are important aspects, begins to alter the logic of journalistic expertise, and expertise in general. Expertise that grows out of modernity seems at odds with celebrity and spectacle. One of journalism’s roles has been to translate expert knowledge for the public, but it has also helped create the celebrity expert as part of its economic imperative. Hence the fox-in-the-henhouse angst over an entertainment celebrity acting as a reporter. When actor Leonardo DiCaprio got a White House interview with Bill Clinton in 2000 to talk about the environment and Earth Day, the professional gnashing of teeth was heard round the North American journalistic world from those who felt such weighty public figures should speak to the public via “proper” news channels (Bishop, 2004). Members of the media heavily police the boundaries of their craft, and the boundaries between news and entertainment, as Bishop points out. Yet the

boundary is more permeable than ever. With digital technologies the eyewitness and DIY categories of publicity are expanding. This flattening out of expertise brings us a new modality of authority based increasingly on affect and steeped in the cult of celebrity.

### **Conclusion: The Affective Expert**

The validity of popular expertise is a growing area of scholarship in media and cultural studies. It is bound up with the increasing visibility of the “ordinary” celebrity (Turner, 2010) in both its industry presentation and in its everyday performance of self. There are ever-increasing numbers of claimants to authority in contemporary life. And greater access has an impact on the hierarchical nature of expertise described earlier. The vocational crossings I discussed help facilitate the flattening out of expertise and cultural authority generally. With the possibility of everyday celebrity, distinction between production and consumption of cultural content fading. This is true in journalism too, where “writer-gatherers,” citizen journalists produce all manner of user-generated news content (Couldry, 2010). Journalists not only interview each other, they routinely borrow (plagiarize) each other’s work without attribution (A. Phillips, 2011). As mainstream journalism struggles to maintain its thrall in the media landscape, it not only turns to alternative voices and sources, but the public turns elsewhere—to alternative news, blogs, satire, celebrity gossip, opinion journalism etc. All of this contributes to a mashup of sources of knowledge, and of expertise.

Popular expertise flows, to a great extent, from lifestyle media, including television programming that popularizes home improvement, gardening, cooking and

eating, self-improvement/empowerment, makeovers, health, fitness, and more (Lewis, 2008). There is no end to the numbers of 'ordinary' people who tell those of us with disposable income what good living and style are about. Lifestyle celebrities, from Martha Stewart to the Fab Five of *Queer Eye* to celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, drive the construction of identity that I discussed earlier with regard to the celebritization of self. Many of these experts have in fact brought the private domestic realm into the public sphere. No longer is the design and appointment of a house a matter for the traditional housewife (Lewis, 2008, pp 6-8). It is a statement about identity and social location. And men are equally target consumers for lifestyle expertise, both in traditionally 'masculine' pursuits such as home renovation and as a new market in aspects of the 'domestic' realm.

Lifestyle expertise is about consumption. The improvement of one's life(style) involves the continual purchase of goods and services. We must buy our way of being in the world, our signification (Featherstone, 1991). Celia Lury argues that "a process of stylization is what best defines consumer culture" (1996, p. 4). Lifestyle experts, who broadcast from online platforms as well as traditional media genres, are gurus of that stylization. They are brands as well and hail us to "brand" both our domestic lifestyles our symbolic working selves in the new economy (Harold, in press; Marwick, 2010). Indeed expertise itself is part of personal branding. Personal branding 'experts' urge us to become 'thought leaders,' to find ways to distinguish ourselves from the pack so that we may have influence within the pack.

A cynic might say the celebrity activist embodies the perfect blend of politics and pleasure, of lifestyle. The well-known figure can provide a kind of shorthand for our own

beliefs and opinions. S/he can limit our need for personal engagement on weighty matters or, conversely, can provide a portal to stimulate our information seeking and knowledge. It is too simple to suggest that people blindly follow celebrities. But, as Richey and Ponte (2011) point out, celebrities do fulfill the need suggested earlier by Turner (2003) of simplifying and generalizing knowledge for the citizen-consumer. Celebrities do not speak entirely as experts in the traditional sense. They are also themselves, and they rely on their personal persuasive power. The role of journalists to translate expertise is altered. Yet this very translation role has helped create, promote and brand the celebrity as expert on social causes (Richey & Ponte, 2011, p. 49). The celebrity's access to leaders and power brokers in turn reinforces their cultural authority.

Celebrities' access to, and deployment of, power has vast implications for the framing of issues celebrities take up as their causes, and for our celebritized "presentational" selves (Marshall, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, celebritized power deployed as expertise, the act of speaking *for* someone else, has significant impact on the people that celebrity campaigns represent. A new media information environment influences the ideas that hold sway, the way they circulate in the public discourse, the ideological assumptions behind them and so on. As such, celebrity experts sometimes replace people with specialized (and equally ideological) knowledge. With their legitimacy and sway based on affect they stand in for the specialists and for the public, often as an eyewitness to need and human suffering.

**CHAPTER 2<sup>4</sup>**  
**“Can this man save this girl?”**  
**Entertainment Celebrity Expertise and Constructing the Other**



Figure 2.1. *Fast Company*. Photos: Damon Winters, *New York Times* (left), Stuart Franklin, *Magnum* (right).

The summer 2011 cover story in the business magazine *Fast Company* chronicles actor Matt Damon and his efforts to bring clean water to poor villages around the world. The piece features Damon and “water expert” Gary White and their partnership in founding Water.org, which helps local people secure funding to drill for and pipe in fresh water. The headline reads: “Can Matt Damon Bring Clean Water to Africa?” (McGirt, 2011). It features a two-photo series, one image of Damon standing in front of what

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<sup>4</sup> Portions of this chapter are published in Bell, K. (2011). “A Delicious Way to Help Save Lives: Race, Commodification and Celebrity in Product (RED),” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 4(3), 163-180, and in Bell, K. M. (2012, in press). *Affective Expertise: The Journalistic Ethics Of Celebrity Sourcing*. In S. J. A. Ward (Ed.), *Global Media Ethics: Problems and Perspectives*. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

looks to be a round porthole window, the other a longer shot of an unidentified girl in the Dogon region of Mali collecting dirty water from a mud hole. The window provides an orange-gold spherical halo behind the actor. It is a none-too-subtle quotation of a stained-glass portrait of Jesus. Overlaid on the Damon photo is the all-caps caption “CAN THIS MAN,” followed by the caption “SAVE THIS GIRL?” over the girl’s photo. What follows is a glowing news account of Damon and his work with White and the organization. The author, senior writer Ellen McGirt, and editors create the metaphorical equation between Damon’s philanthropy and divine intervention through the headline, the photos, the captions, and the piece itself.



Fig. 2.2 St. John the Baptist Anglican Church, Ashfield, New South Wales

This story offers a memorable example of a theme that runs through publicity, including news and entertainment media coverage, about celebrities and their social causes. Campaigns and charities, and news stories about them, frequently hit an emotional register that borrows from ideas of Christian charity and the importance of

good works (cf. Richey & Ponte, 2011). But here, as with other examples, we read that Damon “is more than just the pretty face of Water.org. He has turned himself into a development expert.” Thus the media rhetorically style the Hollywood actor, who has a well of affective power on which to draw, as someone with specialized knowledge. From a news media standpoint, he has the credentials of the more traditional journalistic source. In this case the bifurcated pictorial image of salvation and need is a vivid shortcut to illuminate the problem that needs fixing.

In this chapter I ask the following interrelated questions: How is the celebrity-as-expert represented in campaign publicity and in news and entertainment coverage in distant locales? How does *celebrity* construct the identities of those being helped and what are the implications for those distant Others, produced and consumed as different by distant (hooks, 2001/1992)? What does it mean that the celebrity activist/philanthropist pervades journalism as a source of valorized knowledge in these cases? I examine these questions by looking at the discourses created by celebrity campaigns in tandem with news coverage about them. The mainstream media, always in search of a sound bite to cut through the weeds of complex social policy, turn to the socially conscious celebrity as a go-to source. The rich and famous are squarely in the stable of official sources that are the foundation of news. The legitimacy they gain from such publicity echoes through pop culture and politics as celebrities pronounce on issues ranging from animal rights to voting, from the environment to poverty, and they come in every political stripe.

Campaign publicity works alongside the rhetorical styling of celebrity-as-expert in media coverage. While I take this up from the perspective of branding in Chapter 3, here

I argue that celebrities perform as knowledgeable spokespeople, in this case for Africa, with deeply racialized implications. Celebrity philanthropy in Africa and other distant locales is fraught with ideological tensions; no aid happens outside of the colonial legacy and post-colonial machinations that have deeply marked the continent. Even as publicity generated by famous people highlights some of the dire social and political inequities of our time, it can recentre whiteness, and the power and privilege of the celebrities. It does this recentring, I argue, by exoticizing non-specific representations of the people and places in need and by fashioning narratives of near-divine celebrity greatness.

Celebrities are part of a “discursive formation,” as Foucault (1972) called it, of everyday discourse that reproduces material conditions. In the cases I analyse in this chapter celebrity produces racialized subjectivities of African people as passive and helpless. Thomas Nakayama suggests it is important to examine racial representations from the centres of power as well as from the margins, to make whiteness visible (Nakayama & Krizek 1995). This analysis does not negate celebrities’ desire to bring their fame to bear on global problems of human deprivation. They can and do make on-the-ground interventions in the spiral of poverty and illness. Yet as these celebrities speak *for* others and *for* themselves, they employ a rhetoric of human communality that works in tension with their (perhaps unintentional) representation of Africans as Other. The result is not just an unfortunate lack of clarity in the discursive message. This discursive formation has material consequences, as Foucault suggested as well. The cases in this chapter demonstrate how famous aid, which is intended to help those in need, actually shores up the very global political-economic conditions that many consider to be the root cause of Third World problems.

I begin with the theoretical and historical context of outsiders representing the Other for a home audience. Celebrities are, after all, speaking out to reach the affluent societies in which they are known. Then I discuss how both news accounts and celebrities themselves produce the Other through tropes of salvation and redemption that echo back to the colonial period. Finally, I take up the representation of motherhood as a specific narrative of missionary intervention that is part of the production of the Other. Motherhood is a dominant theme in philanthropy by female stars and it produces a particular discourse of the Other that merits deeper exploration. These sanctioned representations ultimately help constitute a political economy of aid that propels the spiral of need.

### **Creating The Other: Popular Culture Narratives Of Divine Intervention**

*"I represent a lot of [African] people who have no voice at all. In the world's order of things they are the people that count least. . . . They haven't asked me to represent them. It's clearly cheeky but I hope they're glad I do and in God's order of things they're most important." -- Bono (Iley 2005)*

The "White Saviour" of distant Others has long been a vehicle for celebrities in Hollywood film. From *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962) to *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006), from the *Indiana Jones* franchise (cf. Spielberg, 1981) to *Lara Croft* (West, 2001), actors perform roles as heroes who save the day against all odds and thwart dark and ominous adversaries (Dyer, 1997; Shohat, 1991; Shome, 1996). Pop stars take on characters with 'exotic' identities as well, from the heroic, virginal, and steadfast, to the sexy, bad and 'ethnic,' as with Madonna's *Geisha*, *Evita* or *Indian Summer* personas (Fouz-Hernández 2004). With increasing visibility, the famous perform real-life hero roles as

philanthropists who endorse and fund a variety of social causes around the so-called “developing” world.

Since entertainment celebrities derive their authority via their status as pop culture icons, their creative production works synergistically with their philanthropy and with aspects of their “private” lives to produce their personas (cf. Marshall, 2010). In short, we come to know them, or the public version of them, by way of both on-stage and off-stage performances. Both aspects convey ideas and beliefs. Through celebrity we see the public and private realms of life cross, especially given that fans are as interested in what famous people do in life as to what they do on stage or screen (Dyer, 1986, p. 8). A mediatized crossing between public and private is partly what generates their authority to speak on behalf of other people.

Cultural production, as a site where ideologies are produced, maintained, challenged and transformed, has always been imbued with racialized, gendered, classed and nationalistic meanings. At the height of the British imperial project from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries all socioeconomic classes connected to nation via popular culture and it was instrumental in maintaining the empire in Britain (MacKenzie, 1986; Richards, 2001). “Every aspect of popular culture contrived to instill pride in the British imperial achievement,” says music historian Jeffrey Richards. From novels to stage plays to music halls, and later in feature films, popular culture was “about gallant imperial heroes showing the flag and quelling the rebellious natives in far-off dominions” (2001, p. 2). Music was replete with jingoistic refrains. Postcards, magazine illustrations, advertising and commercial packaging were all geared to the nationalistic project of empire (see McClintock, 1995).

Richards writes that popular culture had an instrumental role in the colonial zeitgeist to “reinforce the components of the ideological cluster that constituted British imperialism in its heyday: patriotism, monarchism, hero-worship, Protestantism, racialism and chivalry” (2001: 525). Today, pop culture’s role in shaping contemporary values is not diminished, though it is embedded in a somewhat reconfigured “ideological cluster” of global capitalism. Components of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cluster include patriotism, celebrity, individualism, consumption and, I would argue, race and colourblindness. Now, with burgeoning media interest in celebrities’ private lives, its meanings are equally embedded in the off-stage ‘real’ lives of entertainment celebrities as in their creative roles.

For the celebrities discussed here, their creative production intermingles seamlessly with their charity work and with the public performance of their private lives. From an audience perspective their words and actions constitute their personal views as expressed through traditional mass media and online in social media (Marshall, 2010). The ideologies embedded in their creative work reach their fan bases more inferentially than does their philanthropy and self-promotion, yet the two streams of publicity feed each other and infuse their public personae. Angelina Jolie’s films, with strong female heroes, become an aspect of her off-screen role as a philanthropist. The same can be said for Bono as front man in an iconic male rock band, and for Madonna with the ever-changing characters of her stage performances and recordings. The persona that Oprah Winfrey cultivated on her daytime talk show is an extension of the public performance of her life, and so on.

Andrew Cooper suggests, for example, that it is precisely Angelina Jolie’s “ability to

mix art and real life” that gives her a unique credibility (2008, p. 116). Her work as a star in adventure films, often in ‘exotic’ locales, bolsters her power as a celebrity ambassador. In fact, her interest in the plight of refugees grew out of shooting on location in Cambodia (Jolie, 2003). Likewise, her philanthropy burnishes her appeal as an actor. Reputation is a powerful factor for better and for worse. Jolie’s decision with her partner, Brad Pitt, to birth their first biological child, Shiloh, in Namibia generated a certain amount of negative media coverage. Some media viewed it as a crass juxtaposition between their wealth and the privation in the country (O’Neill, 2006). However, they have largely blunted such criticism through their philanthropic work. They have strategically managed publicity to positive effect, as with Jolie’s feature interview with CNN’s Anderson Cooper that I take up later in the chapter.

Madonna’s foray into Malawi has been contentious (cf. Grigoriadis, 2011). She has been criticized for adopting Malawian children and for promoting a school curriculum in Africa that has links to a religious Kabbalah group. In his book *Celebrity Diplomacy*, Cooper describes her charity work as “crude ventures into Africa” (2008, p. 116). Biographer Andrew Morton (2001) characterizes Madonna as egocentric. Such critiques are not unconnected to her many pop personas over the years dating back to her early Material Girl image in the 1980s. Some scholars have read her personae as aggressively sexual, and others campy and highly appropriative (Fouz-Hernandez & Jarman-Ivens, 2004). Natalie Clarke of the UK’s Daily Mail suggested Madonna’s Malawi project is yet another reinvention “as Mother Madonna, a leather-booted hybrid of Mother Teresa and Angelina Jolie” (2007, p. 20). Yet her cultural authority and financial resources, built up over decades, remain strong. She deploys them in the *Raising Malawi* charity and in the

feature-length documentary with high production values that I analyze in depth.

Bono does not mingle his domestic life as a parent or spouse with his work as a rock musician and philanthropist as readily as do Jolie and Madonna. The same is true for other male celebrities such as George Clooney and Sean Penn. Bono does, however, mix his art with commerce and philanthropy in such a way that at times they are indistinguishable. He publicizes his wife's fashion label, *Edun*, a high-end purveyor of "sustainable" clothing that promotes trade with Africa. He and his wife, Ali Hewson, appeared in 2010 as part of the luxury brand Louis Vuitton's *Core Values* advertising campaign. They wore the *Edun* clothing line and carried Vuitton bags for the African-themed photo shoot by iconic photographer Annie Liebowitz. The ad, shown in Chapter 3, featured the couple disembarking from a small plane in the middle of the African savannah carrying the bags. They both speak of such work as activism and bill it as part of the mission to increase trade with Africa (Louis Vuitton, 2010), though the ad campaign has no charitable component.

What each of these artists have in common, from Madonna's egocentric school curriculum to the Jolie-Pitts' decision to give birth in Namibia is an assumption that their personal interest serves the public interest. Their personal desire, combined with their celebrity subjectivity, shares the spotlight that follows them in order to illuminate these otherwise "dark" areas in the Western conscious. However, it follows a long colonial tradition of speaking for the Other that tends to reify the Western celebrity as the one with voice and the nameless faceless Third World other as a blank recipient of their goodwill.

For instance, Bono made the remark at the opening of this section about speaking

“for people who have no voice at all” upon the 2005 launch of the Product RED campaign. In saying “[t]hey haven’t asked me to represent them. It’s clearly cheeky but I hope they’re glad I do,” Bono both claims his cultural authority and acknowledges presumption behind it. He shows an awareness of the power and privilege that he has explicitly used to put the issues of poverty, developing-world debt and AIDS on the public agenda. At the same time, he is effectively suggesting that he maintaining God’s “order of things.” It is a sort of meek-shall-inherit-the-earth approach, which he constitutes as an intervention to bring about an apparently pre-ordained common good.

In speaking for the Other, Bono continues a long Western tradition of creating an “undifferentiated subject,” as Gayatri Spivak (1988) describes the First World practice of conflating and mapping its desires and interests onto the subaltern. Subaltern is Gramsci’s (1988) term for the subordinate subject whose voice cannot be heard and who has not coalesced as a group in the struggle for hegemony. In Marxist terms, a subaltern class can be politically represented but not yet have class-consciousness. So-called First World representation (be it popular representation or the theorizing of the poststructural Euro-centric scholars such as Foucault, whom Spivak critiques) presumes to speak for a generalized subaltern subject, with no distinctions from within. Such representation ventriloquizes the subaltern, produces a universal subject that matters only in relation to its capacity to serve the ventriloquist. “This benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other is the founding characteristic of much third-worldism ...” Spivak writes (1988, p. 289). In other words, Bono’s speaking *for* does not, indeed cannot, acknowledge a differentiated post-colonial subject. To speak *for* is to maintain the order of things.

The RED campaign and the other examples here, then, constitute an ideological stance that defines a common good, valued in visitors' terms. The voices of non-African celebrities can stifle African perspectives on the desired direction of economic and social life, as critical scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie explains it: "The African person is that person who does not have a 'self', who gets represented or spoken for by others. At the creative level, travellers and settlers in Africa become the spokespersons for the indigenous peoples" (2001, p. 135). White celebrities are among the visitors, or tourists as Zygmunt Bauman (1998) calls them, with a uniquely privileged authority to designate what they see to be a collective need. They can "claim to speak for the communality of humanity" (Dyer 1997, p. 2). With the media's fixation on fame and 'exotic' locales as a backdrop for issues, they fashion the story around the celebrity's good deeds in a faraway land (cf. Richey & Ponte, 2011; Bell, 2012 in press).

In fact, bookstores sometimes categorize celebrity accounts of 'distant' locales as travel writing, though they carry an activist message. Lee Barron (2009) argues that they function as journalistic memoirs and field stories in the Euro-American travel writing tradition, representing a particular place from what appears to be an up-close insider perspective. But in the case of celebrities these writings occupy a unique and sheltered place that comes with privilege and fame. Using Angelina Jolie's *Notes from My Travels* (2003), a journal of some of her early work on refugees, as a case study, Barron argues that this genre of writing further celebrates the traditional traveller's characterization of places far away from home. Jolie's characterization exoticizes place and pronounces on cultural practices, such as her critique of Muslim women's wearing of burkas (Barron, 2009; Jolie, 2003), as other travel writing sometimes does. And Jolie's status as a pop

culture icon gives her representations added cultural authority.

This infantilizing of people in the colonies and of enslaved Africans, is a racial discourse dating back centuries (cf. Burton, 1994; Hall, 1997; Said, 2003/1978), and it is in no small measure linked to Euro-American travel writing. Such depictions were essential for producing the moral and intellectual superiority of white colonizers who believed that the exotic, primitive, Others had to be civilized into the European ideals of work and family through the largesse of the colonizer. As these examples suggest, this narrative retains social force in contemporary media accounts of life in distant locales. In the case of Africa, they prompt a perception of a homogenous continent that is desperately poor, sick, and tribal.

Celebrities do more than just represent, however. In activism and philanthropy, they intervene to raise awareness and money. This intervention can take the form of a 'cure' without a thoroughgoing diagnosis. African peoples become 'victims' of poverty or disease, problems which apparently spring, without history, from hapless circumstance, poor choices, or rotten luck. Such characterization obscures the historical legacy of colonialism and the political-economic vagaries of the post-colonial period, including the substitution of colonial rule for institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Altman, 1999; Barnett, 2002; Mbaku, 2008; Moyo, 2009; Patterson, 2008). Further, there is little space in an ahistorical philanthropy for the specificities of individual African nations and cultures. Abstraction is what *invents* Africa, in the Western mind, as an amorphous locale that is at once exotic, sick, culturally rich, financially poor, diverse and yet non-specific.

## **Constructing The Other: Media Publicity And Celebrity**

In the *Fast Company* cover story, Damon is a cultural authority of transcendent proportions, starting with the images (McGirt, 2011). His picture is a close-up, looking directly at the camera with the halo effect behind him. The photographer shoots the girl from above in an almost animalistic pose as she stoops to collect water. The camera angle looking down on her, combined with the pose, creates the imagery of one who is less than human. Visually the bifurcated image connotes dichotomization, with Damon as the polar opposite of the young girl, rhetorically, socially and materially.<sup>5</sup> In the photo cutline he is a “water warrior,” who eschews fancy galas in favour of digital fundraising and hands-on action. The warrior label suggests one who uses physical force to save the day when talk has failed, a kind of Superman figure.

In the article, McGirt characterizes Damon as self-effacing, an unpretentious person who “lives a quiet life for a celebrity of his stature” (2011). Jesus, the Christian tradition’s saviour, is the embodiment of humility, combined with extra-human power. We learn that in the developing world Damon goes unrecognized from his day job as an “international heartthrob.” People in distant countries are apparently unaware that they are in the presence of Hollywood royalty. The story juxtaposes his anonymity with the instant recognition he receives as he goes to pick his child up from school in Manhattan. Yet there, he retains his middle-class sensibility and is ordinary in spite of his extraordinary life, McGirt tells the reader. It is, as Richard Dyer (1986) argues, a production of the rarified and the ordinary that makes us identify with stars. Fans feel

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis using the concept of bifurcation see Ralina Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial, 1998-2008*, in press.

they have glimpsed the private, yet the celebrity remains on a pedestal, just out of reach.

As this story would have it, Damon is a humble redeemer of distant Others. While the piece is about how the organization, Water.org, helps people secure financing for their own self-identified and initiated water projects, the magazine offers its target audience of Western readers a Matt Damon who is the hope for salvation of poor people far away. Christianity was, of course, the ‘civilizing’ instrument of the colonizing powers in Africa and elsewhere. Missionaries were among the travellers with great disciplinary and representational power. The colonial zeitgeist of moral superiority justified travellers importing both Christianity and capitalism to the “dark” places of the earth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the exploitation of human and natural resources. The media’s contemporary deployment of similar tropes, as in the *Fast Company* article about Damon, echoes an imperialism that continues to exert white and divine salvation.

Celebrities at times do invoke religious themes on their own, via their campaigns, which I discuss in depth later. Bono’s Product RED campaign creates publicity materials around a slogan called the *Lazarus Effect*, a Biblical reference to Jesus’ power to undo death. The Lazarus effect refers to the Gospel of John where Jesus performs a divine act in bringing his follower Lazarus back from the dead. Product RED has used the slogan to draw a shorthand link between the lifesaving impact of antiretroviral drugs for HIV patients and the RED campaign. Just “two pills a day,” purchased with money raised through Western consumers buying designated RED products from iconic brands such as Apple, Converse and Starbucks, can save a person infected with HIV. The name of Madonna’s charity, *Raising Malawi*, suggests the lifting up of a helpless people or, literally, raising its children. Her organization’s school curriculum created for children is

based loosely on a popularized version of the Kabbalah teachings in the Jewish tradition, which is her own personal spiritual practice. The website for her charity is replete with stories and photos depicting the pop diva amidst throngs of adoring black people.

Yet journalism produces and adds its own plethora of 'salvation' themes. One distinction is that critical journalism coverage seldom involves an interview with the celebrity. Those interviews, a much bigger audience draw, do not frequently broach difficult topics such as celebrity adoption, or the commodification that goes with a cause marketing effort like Product RED. As a result, the celebrity, fashioned as expert, is ultimately beholden to no one for his or her role in this powerful exclusive discourse of salvation. Mainstream journalists sometimes ask celebrities about such criticisms in general terms or about the role of fame in philanthropy and activism, but rarely about specific critiques directed at them individually (cf. Williams 2006a; King 2010).

Some long-form and alternative news coverage does take up the tough questions of power, privilege and representation regarding celebrity in distant locales. For example, *New York Magazine* published a lengthy examination of Madonna's charity in the wake of missing funds, its abandonment of plans to build a promised school, and the firing of employees (Grigoriadis, 2011). The piece includes a picture of Madonna as Mary, holding a black child representing David, whom she adopted from the country. The headline reads: "Our Lady of Malawi." The British alternative online publication *Spiked* has published numerous critiques of celebrity involvement in Africa that take up the imperialist themes, including a piece that describes the trend as a "crusade" (Hume, 2005) and one with the headline "Live Aid: the White Pop Star's Burden" (Rothschild, 2010). A story about Madonna's charity on the American culture and entertainment site

Jezebel was headlined *The White (Wo)man's Burden*, also denoting the neocolonial ethos of the pop icon's project (Peterson, 2009).

In 2006, the BBC's Kirsty Wark landed an exclusive interview with Madonna where she did ask direct questions about the controversy surrounding the adoption of her Malawian child called David. The adoption was surrounded by criticism that she appeared to pull strings in the Malawi judicial system and that David still had a father and other living relatives who were torn about losing him (Wark, 2006). Madonna granted that rare interview to deny her critics claims that she had received special treatment from the judicial system. She was, in effect, using her ready access to get her own position on the record and to burnish her public image.

However, feature stories in mainstream print and broadcast formats that interview celebrities tend to be laudatory. They frequently tout the famous person's everyday-ness as a philanthrope, as with the *Fast Company* piece. In a 2007 series of reports from Africa on a junket organized by Bono, NBC's Brian Williams explained that African officials treat the Irish rock star as a head of state, but his fame is unknown to the people he visits on the ground (Williams, 2007). A February 2011 story about George Clooney in *Newsweek* magazine noted the spartan accommodations he keeps while in Sudan (Avlon, 2011). Madonna told a CNN interviewer that she was happily toiling in anonymity in Malawi until the press showed up (Cho, 2009).

Their apparent anonymity serves a number of purposes. It does work to detach the excesses of fame from the juxtaposing relentless poverty and invisibility of the object of their good works—people who are enduring unspeakable hardship. This tamping down of fame and fortune activates a form of legitimacy that comes from being a source on the

ground. It helps produce the “undifferentiated subject” of Spivak’s analysis, the one whom the First World can imagine as different and exotic, yet capable of being evaluated on First World terms. And the tamping down creates rhetorical distance between the celebrity as brand and celebrity as expert or eyewitness, helping to construct the humility and selflessness that is needed if we are to think of Matt Damon, or any celebrity, as someone who can ‘save’ Africa.

Media publicity also sets celebrities up as credentialed experts, another crossing in which the big name source has both eyewitness authenticity and specialized knowledge. News accounts reassure the audience that the famous person is in it for the long haul and that he or she is highly schooled in the problems and potential solutions. As mentioned, McGirt touts Damon as a “development expert,” a move toward constructing him in the realm of the credentialed official source as he retains his powerfully branded cultural authority of celebrity. A 2002 piece in *Time* magazine quoted U.S. Treasury secretary Paul O’Neill as saying Bono knows his stuff around poverty, AIDS and debt (Tyranigel, 2002). A 2011 piece in *The Guardian* quoted a passage from former U.K. prime minister Tony Blair’s memoir where he states that Bono could even be prime minister (Michaels, 2010). Stories about the work of actors from Sean Penn in Haiti to Clooney in Africa make a point of affirming the celebrity’s deep commitment and knowledge, again by quoting a politician or other authority figure that the audience is likely to recognize (Heller, 2011). The celebrity leverages the expertise of already-sanctioned news sources and journalists can leverage the fame and affective power of the famous spokesperson.

In another kind of crossing, celebrities formally partner with journalists and others

who are considered specialists, a move that resolves any question of legitimacy for journalistic purposes. Damon works with White, a trained engineer who has worked for years on water issues and is a recognized name in the world of aid work and microfinance. Clooney, who has co-founded the *Not on Our Watch* project and initiated the Satellite Sentinel project to monitor and deter conflict between North and South Sudan, works with John Pendergrast, a well-known figure in the aid and development world. Pendergrast is a founder of the *Enough Project*, dedicated to ending genocide and crimes against humanity. The two men frequently appear together for interviews about the political and humanitarian conditions in Darfur and Sudan generally, and Clooney defers to Pendergrast (cf. King, 2010). He has also partnered with journalist Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*. The two have travelled together to Africa and Kristof has chronicled Clooney's work (cf. Kristof, 2009, 2010).

The acknowledgment of credibility sets the stage for a compelling story of a celebrity response of superhuman proportions, and one that has no politics. The celebrity "credit card," as Clooney (Blass, 2010) calls it, is gold in the mainstream media. In terms of representation, the journalistic narrative of saviour is also producing the subjectivities of distant Others. As the examples above suggest, those being 'saved' take the background. The celebrity is the real audience draw. While the casting of famous musicians or actors as spokesperson invariably boosts their brand, the people at the heart of the project remain largely nameless, as with the girl at the mud hole in Mali.

Bono has tried to suggest that his celebrity is not the issue, and that journalism's role is to make people stand up off the page and walk (Williams, 2006a). Clooney is humble about the fact that he is only a "megaphone," and that he does work in Sudan

because he has far more media attention than he needs and many people with real problems have none (cf. King, 2010). Despite these intentions, the celebrity is the ultimate focal point of news accounts. Oftentimes other people in the news coverage are not even identified; they are background figures. A feature story about Bono on *NBC Nightly News* in 2006 went so far as to show Bono shaking hands with President of Ghana at the time, John Kofi Kufuor. However the news piece neither identified Kufuor by name, nor quoted him, except a one-second clip in which he tells Bono “you are welcome” (Williams, 2006b).

With journalism’s need for a compelling story and an appearance of detachment, as outlined in Chapter 1, it is not surprising that mainstream news accounts take up the saviour theme that is so prominent in many of the big-name campaigns. Below I examine Madonna’s *Raising Malawi* charity and a feature-length documentary she produced after its launch, as well as Product RED’s use of Biblical tropes to encourage a commercial response to the AIDS crisis in Africa. These cases demonstrate the ways in which the campaigns themselves, as sanctioned by the celebrity, create a narrative of divinely inspired missionary intervention that appears in the media coverage about them.

### **Constructing The Other: Celebrity Campaign Publicity**

The RED campaign’s publicity is built around the Biblical story of Lazarus, in which Jesus uses his divine powers to bring his friend and follower back from the dead. The campaign deploys the *Lazarus Effect* theme in advertising spots and in a 30-minute (RED) documentary produced in by Spike Jonze for HBO (Bangs, 2010). They repeat the message that “two pills a day” will make the difference between life and death for

someone infected with HIV.



Fig. 2.3 Lazarus Effect (RED, 2010)

In one 33-second *Lazarus Effect* spot a miracle takes place before the viewer's eyes. In a series of still photos, (SILVIA) appears—her name in parentheses just as the (RED) logo and “partner” brands are displayed throughout the website—looking blankly upward at the camera. She is leaning slightly forward in a plea for help, demanding the viewer's attention. The background is in soft focus. Her eyes are large and her face particularly dark against a stark white wall. A bed, a small table and a walker are visible in the background. As the video morphs into the full-colour picture, Silvia is cradling her baby and we learn that her transformation is thanks to two pills a day. The images implore the viewer to engage via the affinity created by the smiling direct address to the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The same photo effect is used for the transformations of two others, Nigel and Elimas as the antiretrovirals (ARVs) bring them back from death (Lazarus, n.d.).

This is one example of how RED generalizes these human stories. It drains away the social and political nature of the crisis—poverty and its historical context—in order to construct a communitarian ethos that appeals to Western consumers. Silvia, Nigel and Elimas, and numerous other people, are generalized symbols of the RED cure. They are abstractions. As literary scholar Thomas Keenan has said, “abstraction is the erasure of

difference in the service of likeness or equality” (1993, p. 165). The branding of these three people, with parentheses around their names, incorporates them under the RED word logo and as commodities.

The campaign materials and products frequently play on that logo with adaptations such as Inspi(RED), Desi(RED), Inc(RED)ible and so forth. The companies also use the logo to centre their products: (CONVERSE)<sup>(RED)</sup>, (STARBUCKS)<sup>(RED)</sup> etc. RED subsumes Silvia, Nigel and Elimas under its logo. They become inert symbols of the power of RED and its customers, as evinced in their transformations from grainy black-and-white photos to healthy full-colour images. At no time does the campaign animate them as multi-dimensional people. The strategy to generalize and simplify is a pragmatic one for an advertising campaign; it is an appeal to people with means. But the abstracting of Silvia, Nigel and Elimas makes the story about finding a cure for Africa itself so that “it”—the continent is referred to as a homogenous region—can develop “normally” in the capitalist model. Bono himself has said as much (Williams, 2007; Louis Vuitton, 2010a).

The transformation, where black-and-white photographs of sickly people become radiant full-colour images of health and productivity, highlights a second discourse of abstraction in these texts: post-race. Universality is a feature of post-race, an ideology that asserts that questions of racial inequality are in the past, resolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century during struggles such as the U.S. civil rights movement. Post-race “highlights the continued centrality of race in this ideology where race is ostensibly immaterial,” as Ralina Joseph argues (2009, p. 239). While Joseph is arguing about the American context, the country’s (and Western) ideology of post-race has global impact in cases such as this

where Euro-North American actors deploy their power to help, and to represent, on distant shores. Thus the absence of racial context, as with the celebrity-driven campaigns such as RED and *Raising Malawi*, perpetuates a mythology that racial power dynamics, including the oppression of the colonial period, are in the past.

In the RED philanthropic model the compassionate impulse to alleviate human suffering, and to use commercial means where state-sponsored efforts have been found wanting, requires by design the obscuration of race and its history. The campaign assumes that the political-economic disparities associated with race simply do not sell, as one person associated with it admitted (Perry, 2008). The RED strategy is to create a sunny narrative of universality by refusing race, even though it is a spectral presence hovering over the entire effort. As Joseph argues, the discourse of post-race “cannot escape racialization, complete with controlling images or racialized stereotypes” (pp. 239-40). The intentional obscuration of race in the service of a “universal” human narrative at the very least permits RED consumers to avoid personal guilt. More problematically, it severs the imperial legacy of oppression from the causes of the AIDS pandemic in Africa. With race neatly excised, consumption becomes noblesse oblige. This rhetorical strategy is part of the subtle, yet pervasive, neo-colonial stance that hovers silently over RED and some other celebrity interventions on the continent that I examine here.

The post-race conflation of universal values with Christian values is evident in the Biblical story of Lazarus. In the Gospel of John, Lazarus had been dead for four days when Jesus went to his friend and follower, opened his tomb and bade him to come out, which Lazarus did. The use of this New Testament passage presents RED as a divine

hand, reaching in and bringing people back from the dead. Of course, the ARVs do the work, but RED is the all-powerful force driving the Christian mission to 'save' Africa. The Bible story also states that Jesus delayed going to Lazarus. In fact, the scripture suggests that Jesus waited until Lazarus was dead so that his divine powers would be evident to all. Here RED is the Saviour, performing a divine intervention in a place where the dire realities of globalization are linked to delay and inaction regarding human suffering (cf. Lewis, 2006). The Lazarus story bolsters the post-race ideology of RED as a Christian trope that presents itself as a universal (or best) value by which to measure moral conviction.

RED's branding of Silvia, Nigel and Elimas is a form of "commodity racism," which Anne McClintock (1995) describes in the context of Victorian Britain as having been mass-marketed to citizens via domestic products that appealed to nationalistic sentiments. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, companies marketed soap and other products of the hitherto private domestic realm to the jingoistic impulses of the citizenry of a troubled empire. One could literally scrub the black out and return to the purity of whiteness in the promotional imagery of Pear's Soap and other products of the day. Race was branded to sell commodities to whites. In the RED campaign, race is also branded, albeit more subtly, that is, inferentially (Hall, 1995). It is insidious and not explicit, embedded in the campaign publicity by celebrities and the media.

McClintock argues that the iconography of Victorian advertising did not depict Africans as agents but as "frames for the commodity, valued for *exhibition* alone" (1995, p. 223). The domestic commodity was the agent of history, the civilizing instrument that could produce the "white nigger" as one Victorian bleach ad promised (p. 221-22). In the

RED context, as I discuss in the next chapter, the conspicuous symbols of hip ‘individuality’ and rebellion apparently propel ‘history’—clothing, jewelry, electronics, and designer coffee. Here, Silvia, Elimas and Nigel promote the products as much as they signify the Biblical miracle of ARVs. They are frames for the commodity, which becomes the agent that transforms sickness into health. The commodity does not explicitly scrub out the blackness as with Victorian soap; it buys the antiretroviral drugs that neutralize the pathogen. Meanwhile the RED campaign website visually depicts people in need waiting passively for help.

Madonna’s charity also deploys the tropes of divine salvation and resurrection. The name alone, *Raising Malawi*, suggests a raising from the dead, a lifting out of despair, certainly an act done *to* more than *with*. Her feature-length documentary *I am Because We Are* (Rissman, 2009) is a translation of the Zulu notion of Ubuntu, a take on the phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means a person is a person through other persons. While the phrase is from the South African Zulu, it is frequently used as a slogan to exemplify the philosophy of her charity in Malawi.

Her original plans for a school for girls, later abandoned and in flux at this writing, were controversial for a curriculum loosely linked to the Kabbalah Center, based in Los Angeles, to which Madonna is an early and very public adherent. The Kabbalah Center’s founder Michael Berg co-founded the *Raising Malawi* charity with her, though she has since ended that relationship over a controversy about the charity’s finances. The organization has been thrown into crisis by questions over where \$3.8 million in donations has been spent given that the charity never broke ground on the school (cf. Ryan & Christensen, 2011a, 2011b).

The name—*Raising Malawi*—evokes the White Saviour on a mission to lift up a poor nation, and also to raise its children or perhaps its entire people. Madonna wrote, produced and narrated the 90-minute documentary, *I Am Because We Are*, to tell the stories of AIDS orphans and parents, some of who died during filming. It features well-known people such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former U.S. president Bill Clinton and development economist Jeffrey Sachs. It includes Malawian experts and government officials as well, but celebrities serve a key function in anchoring the cause and framing its terms for a Euro-North American audience. The film’s credibility rests on star power.

Madonna describes one of her solutions, education, through a curriculum based on her own Kabbalah spiritual practices. The U.S.-based Kabbalah Center has been popular among some Hollywood elite, Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher and Rosanne Barr among them, and based loosely upon the secretive Hasidic mystical tradition in Judaism (Ryan & Christensen, 2011a, 2011b). Judaism is virtually non-existent in Malawi. The curriculum, as described in the film, asserts that individual strength and perseverance will help people in Malawi transcend a culture of victimhood. The Kabbalah organization denies that the curriculum has any links to Jewish mysticism, though its name was subsequently changed from the more religious sounding *Spirituality for Kids* to a more secular *Success for Kids*. It teaches an ethic of personal responsibility and self-determination. The program emphasizes individual cause and effect as a life orientation. “We are all in control of the world around us,” Madonna says in the film:

For so many years I played the victim card. When you tap into that consciousness, it keeps you from moving ahead. You get into a cycle of self-destructive behavior. If I could think of a phrase that summed up Spirituality for Kids it’s more like ‘You’re somebody. Believe in yourself. You’re not the sum total of your surroundings. You can change your destiny.’

And more than anything that's what these kids need (Rissman, 2009).

Madonna's asserts that success comes from within, that victimhood is a state of mind, and that to suggest otherwise is to abrogate personal responsibility. She invokes a variation of the term "race card," which became a popular axiom in the U.S. in 1990s, when former football star, actor and broadcaster O.J. Simpson was on trial for the murder of his former wife, Nicole Brown, and her friend Ron Goldman. Critics suggested that the defence exploited Simpson's African American race. They suggested his lawyers' argument that racism drove the case against him was a smokescreen to muddy the damning evidence and facts of the case. They argued that race was irrelevant and that to raise it was playing a kind of wild card, or performing a legal sleight of hand. Here Madonna's use of the term invokes the same meaning, that victimhood is something people invoke to unfairly blame others. No matter the circumstances of our misfortunes, we must never look for causes outside ourselves.

At the same time, she places her own trials alongside those of people who have no secure access to life's basic necessities, equating the death of her mother when she was six years old to the lives of children featured in the film who have lost their entire family. It is a jarring false equivalency—and a universalizing one—with people whose lives bear no resemblance to her upbringing in the U.S. Midwest. She is essentially saying we are all one and we can all pull ourselves up. This powerful "bootstraps" message of individualism seems to be an appeal to the film's target U.S. audience, a culture where individual rights and responsibilities are an ideological mainstay.

She seems to anticipate the pervasive Euro-North American criticisms that Africa is a backward and beyond hope (cf. Hopeless, 2000). The *Spirituality for Kids* segment of

the film comes toward the end, just before the script circles back to its overarching message of communality and after a segment about how people turn to “witchcraft” and drink to escape the grind of poverty. The segment then segues to an upbeat ending, acknowledging what Westerners see as the backward practices at the root of Africa’s problems. We are told that Malawians are finally shedding worn-out ways and taking responsibility, that they are “more eager to tackle their own problems” as former U.S. president Bill Clinton says in the film, and they are seeking people to “empower” them.

The film’s message and the philosophy of *Spirituality For Kids* exemplify a contradictory discourse regarding Africa. On the one hand Ubuntu, “I am not defined without you,” as Malawi’s former finance minister Mathews Chikaonda says in the film. On the other hand, we alone can change our own destiny. The two messages are not wholly incongruous. Personal responsibility is an attractive American ethic, particularly when combined with a message of personal charity. This discursive move fetishizes the ubuntu concept, and retools it the language (and ideology) of individualism. It is *e pluribus unum*, as Crispin Thurlow describes it (2004), a notion of oneness that is imbued with simple patriotism and belonging, but that always excludes as much as it includes.

Clinton and Madonna repeat the mantra of oneness while continuing to construct the people of Africa as distant Others. As Clinton says near the end of the film, Ubuntu signifies “that what we have in common is more important than our interesting differences” (Rissman, 2009). It is First World people like him who get to define and value those differences. Such representations reinforce the superiority of the First World in its own eyes, something Edward Said called “flexible positional superiority”

(Said, 2003/1978). The West maintains the upper hand, as he put it, in the post-colonial period, not through direct governance but through international bodies, policies and representations constructed from the outside. In what seems a genuine effort to help, in the end Madonna, Bono and others reaffirm this well-established neocolonial relationship of subordination.

Bono's and Madonna's films use similar imagery to depict the "interesting differences," as Clinton calls them in *I Am Because We Are* (Rissman, 2009). Both tell us that Africans have a gloriously untrammled take on life, and that the developed world must help preserve that sunny worldview. Both films show dancing and singing, as other media publicity around the RED campaign and Jolie's United Nations work. Invariably such scenes appear in the films without explanation or context. The campaigns particularly show women dancing, singing, feeding and caring for children, all shot in rural areas. These seemingly obligatory images of Africa suggest 'tribal' peoples with 'weird' rites of passage. As Ogundipe-Leslie (2001) points out, the idea of 'woman' in Africa connotes someone who is impoverished, uneducated, primitive, and rural. None of these representations is of the educated, urban or middle classes in African countries. Rather, rural poverty is a prevailing image of Africa in the Western mind.

Ultimately it is the Western traveller who gets to define people. Clinton has the definitive word on the nature of Africa and African-ness in Madonna's film: "People ask me 'Why do you love it so much there'? And I always say it's because they have the highest percentage of people, I believe, anywhere on earth who wake up every day with a song in their heart. They sing through their pain and their need and the madness of people around them. It's almost like an ingrained wisdom of more than 100,000 years"

(Rissman, 2009). In a similar vein, Jolie waxes poetic about the Congo, saying “The Congo is lush, and it's amazing, and...all the people, and they're so different. And they're passionate. And they're tough. And they're vibrant. And they're ready to live” (Cooper, 2006).

Such comments, as with decontextualized images of people dancing, and standing in line for food, are apparent evidence of magnificence, wisdom and singing through pain. Jolie and Clinton are clearly expressing admiration. The characterizations belie the notion of a post-racial world where, as a Starbucks RED commercial says, “What if we’re not separated from everyone else, but connected? What if what we do to another we do to ourselves? What if when we help someone else, we help ourselves? What if when we save another’s life we save our own? What if just part of our purpose here is not Me, but We” (Starbucks, n.d.)? Such rhetoric of “raising” the Other is the discursive space of the White Saviour in all its “functional invisibility” (Nakayama, 1995, p. 297). For the White Saviour to exist, it must have the Other, Africans as a singular timeless human monoculture that bears little resemblance to ‘us’. We are one world in these celebrated representations, but only through a relationship of flexible positional superiority, where outsider intervention appears as apolitical. What results is a call for the salvation of an endangered exotic Other, defined in individualistic Euro-North American terms.

As Spivak and Said remind us, the so-called First World actually constructs the ideological home against which the Third World is valued (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 95-97; Said, 2003/1978, p. 8). The presence of a marginal, primitive or foreign Other is vital to the (neo)colonial psyche. Imperial powers past and present have structured both their own identities and those of the Other in a dichotomous, yet dependent,

relationship, as Said argued. The colonizing power essentially creates the Other for its own self-identity and belonging as much as for economic exploitation.

Said's concept of Orientalism is, among other things, "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2003/1978, p. 2). Thus a distinction between East and West becomes a distinction between civilization and barbarism, cleanliness and filth, development and primitivism. As the colonizer constructs the Orient, or Other, it is exoticised and made available for appropriation. Orientalism, as a discourse of imperialism, is both a theory and practice in which there has been considerable material investment (Said, 2003/1978, p. 6; also 1993, pp. 7-9). Those material stakes drive an impetus to maintain a dominant-subordinate power relation in conjunction with the need to appropriate and repurpose the culture of the Other. In the contemporary moment, even under the guise of "post-race," the West continues to invent whiteness as superior, moral, good, in contrast to a racialized Third World Other through celebrated interventions.

In RED's use of visiting celebrity "ambassadors" we see a direct deployment of fame that produces the post-racial white saviour. Actors Scarlett Johansson and models Elle MacPherson and Christy Turlington have visited RED countries. They appear on the website in photos and videos, posing with children or women in a village setting where RED money has helped bring food and medicine. The campaign engaged only white celebrities as RED ambassadors. In a video shot in an unidentified village in Swaziland, Turlington describes how ARVs are available to everyone because of the RED money (Turlington, 2007). There is a new optimism, she says, thanks to consumers:

It feels like this is a turning point for Swaziland, and I think that we've all contributed on some level, all the consumers, and myself included. It feels good to be a part in some small way to this change, this progress.... To keep a child alive, to keep a mother alive for her child, it's an invaluable gift that we can give, and through the purchasing of products that we already love and want we're able to contribute in a big way to this country getting out of the position that they're in.



Fig. 2.4 Turlington in Swaziland

The video features a collage of scenes of Turlington interacting with local people. She meets a group of women; they adorn her with traditional garb; she takes part in a dance. We see her attempting the dance movements, posing with children who silently look into the camera, and serving up food to a queue of youngsters. A waiting-room scene in the video opens with a white hand touching a very tiny black hand and widens to show us that the model is sitting beside a woman holding a child. The woman looks neither at Turlington nor at the camera. She appears to be uncomfortable, sad or angry and her gaze remains down at the child. She does not speak. She is a prop, albeit for a good cause. This interaction between celebrity, woman and child evinces a heartbreaking

juxtaposition of privilege and loss of dignity in posing for the camera. While the woman may have given consent to be filmed—we do not know—she is without agency.

Turlington hands out food in an ultimate gesture of colourblind white feminine power. She states that this is a turning point for Swaziland; UN figures suggest that 26 per cent of adults in the country are HIV positive, the highest prevalence ever found in a national population-based survey (Sub-Saharan Africa, 2008). Turlington's whiteness backgrounds people in the unidentified village. The dance and songs have no context. They are a staged, exoticized performance of a fetishized culture. The setting and the people, mostly silent or with no translation when they do speak, are props. It is up to consumers and American largesse to solve the crisis. Bono has made no apologies about speaking for people in Africa. In a 2005 interview he acknowledged that no one has asked him to do so but he added, "I hope they're glad I do" (Iley, 2005). His own whiteness positions him to claim this authority with the full sanction of the mainstream media.

Bono and Madonna do decentre whiteness in some moments. Bono's 30-minute *Lazarus Effect* feature offers a look at on-the-ground AIDS treatment from the perspective of Zambian health-care professionals and their patients. It tells the story of how local workers are distributing anti-retroviral medications and promoting openness and HIV testing through the eyes of Constance Mudenda, who runs three clinics and Dr. Mannesseh Phiri, a pioneer in the use of antiretroviral AIDS drugs. The film is partly about local empowerment and the ground-level effort to destigmatise HIV-AIDS (Bangs, 2010). *I Am Because We Are* provides a rare glimpse at the colonial legacy that has marked Malawi. It references British rule of the region, including footage of Lord Perth, a

British colonial minister in the 1950s and 60s, admitting that Malawi, then Nyasaland, was not a priority. "I'm afraid its priority slipped although we genuinely were going to do things for them. We kept on finding that other things cropped up, which to us seemed more important. So they got left behind" (Rissman, 2009). Yet, even as it acknowledges a colonial past, the film preserves the narrative of paternalism and philanthropy regarding what the British could have done to help the people of Malawi. It is weak context that does not acknowledge colonial theft of resources and destruction of local infrastructure that contributes to the present-day situation.

Madonna's film does provide a thumbnail of the history imposed on the country, including its eventual independence and subsequent decades-long dictatorship. Madonna discusses the problems that generations of grinding poverty have brought to Malawi, including cruelty, superstition, helplessness, which many people feel unable to change. She aims to contextualize those conditions within the broader problems of the so-called developed world, pointing to the barbarism of war, poverty, and environmental disaster, as well as religious and political strife around the globe. The film moves rapidly through images of Western religious zealotry, clearcutting, gambling, a stock exchange, garbage dumps, flag burning and other violence as evidence that "modernization equals no humanity." It attempts to frame indigenous traditional practices that seem "strange" in the context of harsh and violent practices in the so-called First World. It is a move that helps contextualize aspects of life in the country that are often dismissed as backward.

Yet, ultimately the film circles back to a we-they "dichotomy," as Madonna herself calls it: "You get caught up in this dichotomy where you think 'If they could only

understand what I understand then they could fix everything.' Then I look at the way they live and I think 'Oh God, they have illnesses and they have cultural traditions that seem antithetical to life but they're happy. And you could drive down a street in Beverly Hills ... and you don't see that kind of joy." This characterization suggests that while poverty is primitive, it is where true joy flourishes. It is a curious invocation of the notion that "money can't buy happiness" in the face of consumption-dependent modern celebrity.

One specific manifestation of the post-racial white savior trope is in the representation of motherhood by such celebrities as Madonna and Jolie. These women, among others, have come to symbolize both privileged, sanctioned motherhood and foreign adoption from poor countries around the world. Their own characterizations of themselves as mothers, as well as media coverage of them, present an image of ideal motherhood. Such imagery stands in juxtaposition with the portrayal of poor women they meet and represent in their philanthropic travels.

### **Celebrity Motherhood: Adopting Mother Africa**

*"Next we'll adopt....We don't know which country but we're looking at different countries. And it's going to be the balance of what would be best for Mad and for Z right now. You know, another boy, another girl, which country, which race, would fit best with the kids." (Angelina Jolie in Cooper, 2006)*

In 2006, CNN's Anderson Cooper produced a special edition of his nightly *AC 360* cable news program called *Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood*, about the actor's work as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. The interview was billed as being devoted to the world's 15 million refugees. It came

just days after Jolie gave birth to her daughter Shiloh, with actor Brad Pitt, in a hospital in Namibia. The title of the two-hour special invokes the missionary theme explicitly, and in the context of the powerful, heavily celebritized discourse of motherhood, another racially charged historical subjectivity vis-à-vis formerly colonized places such as Africa.

Jolie, as with Madonna, is the mother of biological children and of babies adopted from the so-called Third World. The children are an aspect of Jolie's Hollywood makeover from her youth as a goth wild child to a philanthropist and working mother of six. Three of her children with Pitt are adopted, from Cambodia (Maddox), Ethiopia (Zahara) and Vietnam (Pax). Shiloh was their first biological child, born in Namibia in 2006 amid a media spectacle and criticism about the resources the small country expended on ensuring the privacy and security of the famous couple (cf. O'Neill 2006).



**Fig 2.5 Jolie-Cooper CNN 2006**

Jolie and Pitt have chosen to parent publicly, gaining a measure of control over the paparazzi who track their every move. The interview Jolie bestowed on Cooper was an exclusive for CNN. It was an entertainment-style encounter that also claimed space as a hard news special. Cooper, who gained a reputation during Hurricane Katrina as someone who asked pointed and uncomfortable questions about the plight of the dispossessed,<sup>6</sup> did not delve into the challenging questions associated with Jolie's childbirth. Neither did Cooper ask broader questions about the complex issue of international adoptions generally, though the interview implicitly frames adoption as one answer to the problems of poverty, the AIDS pandemic and displacement.

The interview is replete with portrayals of Jolie as a mother, as one might expect given the timing. She and Cooper entwine discussion of her work as a UN goodwill ambassador with her motherhood to create a form of highly personal affective expertise on the topics of refugees, war, poverty and aid. In doing so they—and Cooper specifically as the journalist—reinscribe stereotypes of people in Africa and elsewhere the 'developing' world as passive victims who maintain a sunny approach to life. The special, which includes reports from CNN correspondents, combines representations of Jolie as a mother with her journey to the cause of celebrity emissary, and her impressions of the situation on the ground in refugee camps. She is both expert and eyewitness on the topics of refugees and motherhood.

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<sup>6</sup> In a frequently cited live interview in 2005 Cooper challenged Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana on her stock answer praising the government helping Katrina victims; he repeatedly asked her about the dead bodies in the streets and the homeless people without food and water.

Jolie invokes her motherhood to answer larger questions about the conditions on the ground. She takes her personal anxieties that her adopted daughter could be sick and uses them to elaborate a larger point and make the poverty 'real' for viewers:

COOPER: One in four children in Niger dies before the age 5, which to me, I still cannot wrap my mind around. It's hard -- I always try to figure out, how do you make that real for people here? You know, how do you make that a reality? Is it something you have figured out a way to make real for people?

JOLIE: No. I don't think so. I mean, I'd like to -- I certainly know with my children, maybe -- I mean, people -- a lot of people ask me about my daughter Zahara who is an AIDS orphan, and she -- because we couldn't hide her from the press. People knew how sick she was when she came home. And so maybe in some way, she's been hopefully a positive example of what just basic care and food can do to a child (Cooper, 2006).

She goes on to say that her own child was not HIV positive and what a relief it was and explains how she feels (guilty) to take just one child for adoption when so many are in need. The exchange culminates in the two agreeing that it is important to "do what you can." This is stated not as a plea to viewers exactly, but as a personal credo for the privileged. It is an individualistic response to the larger structural question of childhood poverty and illness that Cooper raised.

The interview demonstrates the blending of the public and private, of expert source and eyewitness, that is well suited to journalism's need for a compelling narrative to animate a complex issue. Jolie explicitly makes the political "real" via her own personal experience as a mother. But this is not "the personal is political" to quote the second-wave feminist adage. Hers is not the feminist cry for validation of women both inside the home and outside. This is privileged white motherhood as expertise in a mutually beneficial relationship between celebrity and mainstream media.

Cooper injects his own perspective, based on experience working as a journalist in areas of devastation and conflict. He frames one question thus: "Do you go through phases? I mean, when I first went to Somalia in the early '90s during the famine, I remember being overwhelmed. And then I felt like I was going through phases, the more wars I would go to, of anger, and then confusion..." (Cooper, 2006). At another he mentions his favourable views of the organization Doctors Without Borders. Early on he lauds the fact that Jolie gives one third of her income to charity. Clearly this entertainment-genre interview is not under the rubric of journalistic objectivity as discussed earlier, and yet it is being performed as such, with the ostensible subject the serious issue of stateless peoples. It is a potent media event.

The point is not that experiential ways of knowing, such as motherhood, are lesser. As many feminist scholars have pointed out, the structural separation of the public and private realms is historically bound up with women's oppression. The barrier between the professional and domestic, the rational and irrational is the division between the masculine and feminine, the visible and invisible and even work and not work (cf. Fraser 1992; Warner 2002). To insist that the private and affective have no place in the public realm, is to accept a dichotomy that has marginalized what is categorized as feminine. It places the rational and solemn on the one side and the emotional and frivolous on the other, as many scholars have argued. And it devalues female subjectivity. Mainstream news, with its roots in modernity's scientism and rationality, is a party to that representation of gender.

However, in this scenario ideal motherhood is celebratized, *white* motherhood. It reinscribes a form of privilege with strong neo-colonial implications for the ethics of

representation. One pointed example is how Jolie is able, in the context of the 2006 Cooper interview, to state unproblematically that she and Pitt are in the process of deciding the race, gender and nationality of their next adoptive child. The decision, she says, is “going to be the balance of what would be best for Mad and for Z right now.” It is an astonishing moment that has the unfortunate ring of someone speaking about selecting a family pet. Cooper gives her carte blanche to make such a remark as he leaves unchallenged the presumption contained within it.

From a news perspective Jolie fulfills multiple imperatives—eyewitness, expert source, and recognizable name. These attributes satisfy the mainstream media’s need, particularly in broadcasting, for both serious content and audience numbers. She is a “get” in broadcast parlance. Cooper’s own legitimacy as a well-known journalist lends credence to Jolie’s project, and she brings prestige to him as a journalist. Her 2006 interview brought visibility to a struggling cable news network. The Cooper interview drew more than 1.3 million viewers, according to the Associated Press, amid criticism that CNN had sullied itself as a purveyor of hard news and that it managed to make even a celebrity interview boring (cf. USA Today, 2006).

These media representations suggest a flattening out of expertise and the recontextualization of fame in the converged genres of news, entertainment, and lifestyle. White privilege and the legitimacy accorded her as a ‘credentialed’ UNHCR celebrity diplomat together activate Jolie’s expert motherhood. Her status as a mother gives her credibility; she is a complete woman because of her motherhood, an exemplar of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call the “new momism” (2004). She does it all; she has a career and she is a completely devoted and present mother. She is in

control of her destiny and motherhood makes her an expert on Africa because its children are in need. In a sense she has a diplomatic passport to pronounce on all things related to women and children, to speak for those perceived to be voiceless. She claims the privilege of white femininity and its presumption to speak for motherhood, as many feminist scholars argue.<sup>7</sup> Cooper enables her privilege and expertise in that his questions and conversational style presume diplomatic status and “new momism.”

Motherhood is a loaded concept when it comes to its historical context in Africa. It is pregnant with politically charged ideals of purity, race, class and belonging (Hill Collins, 2006). In many ways an aspect of popular culture, motherhood has deep roots in the imperial project (Burton, 1994). Ogunidipe-Leslie (2001) argues that African women are “at the heart of the discursive storms around voice and voicelessness” (p. 135). ‘Proper’ motherhood in the Western mind is affluent, hip and largely white (Hill Collins, 2006; Douglas & Michaels, 2004). In recent years motherhood has become an important strand of popular culture and part of many female celebrities’ brands. The baby bump is a trademark logo of sorts and a prized image for the paparazzi. It is also one of the ways in which the media surveil motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 7). Celebrity parenting is ever more visible; it presents fans with another powerful avenue of access to see who their icon “really” is, as Dyer put it and, more importantly, what motherhood

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to those discussed in this chapter see, for example, Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99; Aimee M. Carrillo Rowe, "Locating Feminism's Subject: The Paradox of White Femininity and the Struggle to Forge Feminist Alliances." *Communication theory: A journal of the International Communication Association*. 10, no. 1 (2000): 64-64.

can and should look like.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, colonizers juxtaposed white motherhood with non-white motherhood for political aims. Life was harsh for European women and children, Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama argues, and by drawing distinctions from their colonial counterparts white women could leverage their own aspirations. Inequalities of race, class, gender worked together “generating a repressive imperial ideology” that acted in and on European life (Mama, 1997, p. 49). In fact, the First Wave feminist campaign for women’s suffrage was built upon the argument that British women were moral and civilized creatures, and to deny them the vote was to cast them as no better than the ‘primitive’ women of the colonies who were subject to the brutality of their husbands (Burton, 1994).

The historical ideal of colonial women as civilized mothers and keepers of the race, tasked with teaching colonized women about childrearing, is an ideological mainstay that lives on in the contemporary U.S. milieu (Hill Collins, 2006). There are “real” mothers, legitimized as best suited for reproducing the American population and the “alleged values of the U.S. nation-state” (p. 55). They are authentic, sincere, honest and reliable, but also affluent, heterosexual, married, white and American. Media discourse commonly frames people of other races, classes, and positions against this ideal, and therefore discursively produces such women as inherently less fit. Those ideals, as Hill Collins notes, have direct material consequences in terms of access to resources. They have consequences in contemporary Africa as well.

Other female celebrities deploy their maternal selves as an assertion of expertise in their philanthropic causes. Model Christy Turlington cites being a mother as her

reason for getting involved in Bono's Product RED campaign (Turlington n.d.). Madonna inserts the phrase "as a mother" into her media explanation of how and why the plight of Malawian children resonates with her, and to explain the desire to take all of the children home (Cho 2009). Even childless Oprah Winfrey invokes motherhood to speak of the girls who attend her exclusive school in South Africa. When abuse allegations against the school's dorm matron surfaced, a shaken Winfrey told the media: "I am a mama bear when it comes to protecting my children. These girls are like my children." (Hemmer & Nauert 2007).

Madonna, a public, sometimes-transgressive icon of motherhood, adopted two of her four children from Malawi. A symbol of white femininity, her given name is derived from the purity of Jesus' mother Mary. Her film *I Am Because We Are* opens with scenes of the pop star walking through a village flanked by a group of people, holding the hand of a young boy. As the shot zooms in on the two and eventually their two hands—black and white—the video is interspersed with a rapid-fire collage of news headlines about the scandal surrounding Madonna's adoption of a young orphan named David Banda. He ultimately became the third of her four children. A Malawian court initially rejected her application to adopt David, whose father still lives in the country. In the film, Madonna picks up his story briefly at the Home of Hope orphanage:

When I returned to Malawi three months later, David's health had deteriorated. He had pneumonia and malaria and God knows what else. There was not medicine for him at Home of Hope, or any means to treat his illnesses. What was I prepared to do? If I was challenging people to open up their minds and their hearts, then I had to be willing to stand at the front of the line. I decided to try and adopt him. The rest is history (Rissman, 2009).

Madonna's charity exists to intervene in the lives of one million orphans in Malawi, many of who will die. From that vast scenario she chose David and opted to reference her controversial case in the film for reasons that are not clear. She later adopted a girl named Mercy, also from Malawi. It is not possible to know her motivations for mentioning David's adoption. But in this brief moment she recentres herself as a larger-than-life intervener. She provides no context for her personal story within the broader issues of the documentary. She is the traveller to which Ogundipe-Leslie refers, speaking authoritatively *for* the parents and children of Malawi and for herself as a mother.

Though the opening sequence contains the collage of headlines about her legal battles over David, Madonna never actually discusses the controversial adoption process, or the complexities of international adoption generally. Through this absence she posits adoption of AIDS orphans unproblematically as a remedy for the crisis, with her own case as a model. Is it a call for other parents to step in and adopt Malawian children? In fact, psychologists at the University of Liverpool have gone so far as to suggest this so-called "Madonna effect" has contributed to an increase in international adoptions without a concomitant discussion about the potential repercussions for children (Liverpool, 2008 59). At the same time, Madonna's insertion of her personal story in her documentary bolsters a broader theme: the power of the individual. This narrative is key to the work of her charity and the school she has sponsored. Individual action is a formula she puts forward as a remedy for raising Malawi.

Jolie's and Madonna's performances of white affluent motherhood have discursive power to represent African motherhood as primitive and unreliable. Their personal gestures—plucking chosen babies from a harsh existence to live in unimaginable luxury,

being photographed amid a sea of black faces, touching, holding, feeding, and playing with children—are highly individualistic acts. They are distinctly gestures of motherhood; Bono, for example, makes few similar shows of parental affection. As we have seen, his (RED) campaign dispatches female celebrity “ambassadors” such as Christie Turlington and Elle MacPherson to mingle with the women and children, again reinscribing the hegemonic image of the white mother. These acts have discursive power as well with regard to notions of motherhood and parenting of one’s own and others’ children, as Oprah’s comment suggests.

Both Jolie and Madonna, not to mention Turlington, MacPherson, Scarlett Johansson and others, have visited hundreds of children who are without parents or means to survive. Their existence is day-to-day at best. It is hard to imagine that these are not deeply heartfelt moves designed to intervene in the inequality and suffering. The work of these women reminds us of the tragedy that life is cheap in some parts of the world. And yet the actions of Madonna and Jolie, sweeping in as white saviours to “rescue” individual children, exude white privilege that has structural force.

There is a particular self-referentiality in their mission as privileged mothers. Jolie and Madonna incorporate their parental role into their larger philanthropic efforts. Bono’s four children, for example, are almost never in the (RED) picture. By contrast, Jolie’s quote about choosing the birth country of her next adopted child displays a sense of ownership; she has the run of the so-called Third World and a mandate to be the mother of its children. Behind the comment is a tacit assertion that her philanthropy serves her parental desires, and vice versa. The CNN interview title itself: *Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood*, makes this symbiotic link between motherhood and

missionary zeal, suggesting that her mission in Africa includes being a mother of its children.

### **Conclusion: AIDS, Globalization and Celebrity Representation**

These mediatized post-racial celebrity models of salvation and motherhood generate cultural authority that goes beyond their power to represent. Celebrity discourses in and on Africa produce material results that are not just about the money they raise; they are part of the structure of global aid. As such they are entwined with the starkly uneven impact that globalization has on individuals, communities and societies. These celebrity interventions abet the “flexible positional superiority” (Said 2003/1978) that is contemporary globalization as sanctioned by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, imperialist bureaucracies run by the wealthiest countries (Moyo, 2009; Spivak & Harasym, 1990). Poverty, lack of medical care and opportunity, and a deepening spiral of dependence on foreign aid are the vagaries of a system that pushes African countries toward economic and governance structures that service global capital (cf. Bond, 2006; Kieh, 2008). In this ‘progress’ narrative, HIV/AIDS and poverty are a barrier to social and economic development (Hein, Bartsch & Kohlmorgen, 2007) that stifles labour power, the cheap resource needed to extract raw materials and produce commodities.

These examples of celebritized expertise are part of what some Africanist scholars call the “new globalization” (Kieh, 2008). The dominance of non-state actors and multinational corporations, the rolling back of the state, pressure to privatize in “developing” countries and other free-market strategies, all characterize this mode of

capitalism, as well as other forms of cultural, environmental, political and military globalization. Celebrity interventions in African countries are bound up in the neocolonial equation of privatization and aid. What Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo calls “glamour aid” (2009, p. 27) is a form of expertise. The parade of celebrity intervention overshadows Africa’s own leaders, as with the NBC news story about Bono that neglects to even identify Ghana’s President Kufuor (Williams, 2006b).

Yet celebrity experts appear to give aid in Africa a transcendence that knows no politics, be it Product RED’s cause marketing for AIDS medications, the education and poverty efforts of Madonna and Damon, or the diplomacy of Jolie and Clooney. They are untethered experts who help the news and entertainment media perform objectivity and detachment by serving as credentialed sources and eyewitnesses. In the case of RED, Bono’s credibility helps partner companies frame these conditions in terms of the apparently benign (but actually neocolonial) discourse of corporate social responsibility (Munshi & Kurian, 2005). The practice of corporate responsibility can help mitigate social and environmental damage in the short term, as corporations close sweat shops or engage in fair trade practices at the prodding of activists. However structural inequality remains, and contributes to a spiral of trade deficits (Kieh, 2008), a major factor in the ongoing poverty that cannot but be linked to the spread of AIDS and poor social services that these campaigns seek to eliminate (Altman, 1998, 1999).

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for two-thirds of all people living with HIV and for three-quarters of all AIDS deaths, according to 2007 United Nations statistics (Sub-Saharan, 2008). The continent has about 11 per cent of the world’s population. The present configuration of global capital widens the divide between rich and poor. These

celebrity campaigns' framing of the crisis, especially that of Product RED as a marketing project, relies on a global economy based on consumption of cheap goods and the creation of need for those products. That imperative requires that economies generate disposable income for some people and a system of production and trade that can continually find cheap labour and natural resources.

This is not to say there is never a case for celebrity philanthropy. But the powerful formula of celebrity as unquestioned expert on complex global problems has a deep impact that resonates through the political economy of aid and Third World debt and governance. It becomes one of the many Band-Aids for the problem defined by outsiders, in some cases simply stepping into a breach left by state actors. Celebrity authority declares these interventions a cure, as part of a rhetoric of aid for a home audience whose only knowledge about Africa might be through the celebrity herself. This approach to philanthropy creates a simplistic "reality" around complex structural problems. The material results may ultimately not even serve the celebrity's aims; the representations perpetuate demeaning productions of the Other that continue the cycle of need and aid.

This chapter covers one key aspect of celebrity cultural authority, the power to define the racialized Other that is a feature of culture industry-produced fame and the wider political and economic impact of that of that authority. But how does that production create need for the home audience and how does it construct the identity of the consumer-citizen who is to be the apparent agent of change? How does the creation of need happen when one of the products on offer is Africa itself? The marketing of peoples and locales, and of products that represent them, is of utmost importance in

successfully bringing Africa to the Western consumer. Product RED is a good place to examine the construction of consumer identity as the campaign is constructed entirely around brands and products as a funding model to raise money for AIDS drugs in African countries.

## Chapter 3

### Rebel with a Cause: Branding Activism, Branding Africa

*“(RED) is not a charity. (RED) is not a cause. (RED) is not a theory. (RED) is a simple idea that transforms our incredible collective power as consumers into a financial force to help others in need. (RED) is where desire meets virtue.” (Product RED, 2009).*



Figure 3.1. Sledd & Michelle (right) at (RED) makeover (Sledd, 2010)

In a video featured on the Product RED campaign website fashion “vlogger” William Sledd “captures” a woman in a suburban shopping mall, someone “who is completely busted down,” and remakes her in Product RED clothing (Sledd, 2010). In a “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” moment he rescues the young woman from a doomed life of looking “totally scary” in loose-fitting sweatshirts and Ugg boots, and takes her on a rollicking Christmastime shopping trip through the mall. Sledd transforms her into a “totally cute” socially conscious consumer with a new lease on life.

Sledd uses a Product RED Dell computer in an electronics store to order the woman some RED Converse sneakers and other items. He proceeds to the Gap and a Hallmark store with a quick cup of Starbucks RED coffee thrown into the mix. The virtues of buying RED holiday gifts are simple, he explains: "It gives back to people." As the woman, Michelle, is getting her hair done, he pulls out the items he has ordered online to complete his showcasing of the campaign's corporate sponsors.

Finally he declares Michelle a fashion success. "I feel so much better," she enthuses. Sledd delights in the fact that her "bitches" might not recognize her without her dowdy exterior. He declares himself proud of the makeover and states: "The great thing about RED is that you're shopping to save lives, and it's a great thing for gifts." He sends Michelle on her way, content that their shopping spree in Kentucky Oaks Mall in Anywhere, U.S.A. (specifically Paducah, Kentucky) has had a much larger purpose.

The Product RED campaign is fundamentally about branding. It uses the affective energies of the brand to bring the consumer market to bear on a serious global problem, the AIDS pandemic in Africa. As such it presents an opportunity to think through how celebrity cultural authority melds consumption and citizenship together, and how it addresses the consumer-citizen to do so. Bono, who started the project along with Bobby Shriver, a scion of the Kennedy political family in the United States, has declared that he created RED as a way to harness the Western consumer lifestyle for a nobler purpose. The campaign asserts, as in the quote above from its website, that it is not a charity but a way for commerce to bring aid to the world. One can "shop and do good" at the same time (RED n.d.). This is not even a "cause," organizers insist; it is collective consumer power driven by desire, but virtuous desire.

RED raises revenue through its partnership with more than 20 major brands, including iconic names such as Apple, Converse, Starbucks and the Gap. The companies designate some of their products as RED, and donate a portion of their profits to a public-private partnership called the Global Fund. It distributes the money to governmental and non-governmental agencies in designated “RED” countries. According to its own figures, the campaign generated \$180 million as of early 2012 and claims to have “reached” more than 7.5 million people “with testing, counselling, treatment and other services” (Product RED, n.d.). Much of the money goes to purchase antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) for people who cannot afford them, and to education and training, according to the RED publicity materials.

The campaign hails the consumer in two ways. Firstly, it uses the expert voice to present itself as an authority on the issue of AIDS, including on how commerce provides an answer to that problem. Secondly, it activates a kind of *enchantment* as a way to blend commerce and philanthropy, and to enhance the cultural authority of the campaign. RED works to create enchantment, something Jane Bennett (2001) describes as “a state of wonder ... the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement” (p.5) that comes from an unexpected encounter or experience. She argues that the commodity form can actually induce this state of being even amid the hypercommercialization of contemporary life, and that it can bring about beneficent actions.

Ultimately, I argue, this emotional state is a rationalized construction of need regardless of the philanthropic intent when it is produced via the commodity form. The RED campaign, as a market approach to social intervention, fabricates enchantment that

enables its presentation as activism. RED becomes a kind of charitable “cathedral of consumption,” to quote George Ritzer (2000). Its ultimate purpose, even though it is for a good cause, is in line with other such cathedrals that Ritzer identifies, such as shopping malls and theme parks. Their job is to continually regenerate the desire that powers the economic order. Bennett’s notion of enchantment is as a salve for the relentless desire that drives consumer capitalism. Her view would suggest that a market-oriented approach such as RED can potentially “loosen the hold of the disenchantment tale” because of its beneficent objectives. I deploy Ritzer’s argument to suggest that the campaign enchants to give desire a seemingly higher purpose. It specifically brands rebellion and blends it with a counterposing production of spiritual transcendence to produce a rationalized enchantment that helps generate the campaign’s cultural authority.

Celebrity is an *enchanted agent* in the bind between commerce and citizenship in this equation. Philanthropy and activism are mechanisms through which stars enthrall the audience or public, and that enchantment in turn produces their authoritative voice. In the case of Product RED, Bono’s brand recognition is essential to enchanting the project, as is the participation of other celebrities. Indeed, Bennett’s view of consumer culture accords with what Bono and the RED campaign have articulated about the campaign’s funding model. It uses celebrity and a buoyant message about consumer power to create a spiritual quality that is meant to transcend the simple exchange relationship of the project. Bennett would argue that quality can be spontaneous, even in relationship to the commodity; I suggest it is a strategic outcome of branding. This disputed notion of enchantment provides a vehicle to explore how RED folds together

the competing notions of desire and virtue, and how celebritized branding accomplishes such a collapse.

With this in mind, I ask how does a consumption-oriented campaign such as Product RED blend desire and virtue to generate enchantment as a form of cultural authority? What identities and subjectivities does RED produce with its marriage between an attachment to the material objects of consumer life and the affective energies of branded activism? I begin with a discussion of RED as a branded celebritized cause, and then examine the campaign and its partner companies' publicity in relationship to perspectives on enchantment that Ritzer and Bennett theorize. As an unabashedly commercial model for celebrity activism, RED is a rich site from which to explore celebrity as an authoritative way to brand "solutions" for social problems. I argue that RED's enchantment of the commodity form engenders a self-referential compartment that is more about "desire" than "virtue."

### **Branding and Celebritized Cultural Authority**

Branding is all about forging an affective connection with consumers and it is deeply involved in the construction of identity. In wealthy consumer societies, where people with disposable income want for little, the late capitalist imperative of consumption demands that companies use branding to create need. Increasingly, brands service that imperative by conjuring lifestyle, or the possibility of lifestyle, where goods take a back seat to consumers' relationship with them as a fulfillment of personal identity. Authors such as Naomi Klein (2000) have argued that branding is no longer about selling products. After all, few big brand companies actually manufacture anything.

Over the past few decades most products have been outsourced to distant factories where cheap labour is available. As the mantra goes, it has been “brands, not products” since the 1990s (Klein, 2001, p. 15-21).

Companies sell a kind of affective resonance, often with little direct connection to the material goods on offer. In a world awash in commodities of similar quality, companies can alter the product design and functionality, but to tamper with the brand is something corporations do with great caution (Levine, 2003). In fact Klein quotes Nike CEO Phil Knight invoking the “brands, not products” mantra when he described Nike as “a marketing-oriented company, and the product is our most important marketing tool” (2000, p. 22). Brands create a specific identity for a company, individual or product, as marketing agent Michael Levine says (p. 3-5). The corollary is that they hail us as consumers who want some of that identity. They are “a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space” (Lury, 2004, pp. 1-2). This suggests that they organize our lifestyles for us, and model our actions as consumers who identify with particular notions of self. The brand is no longer a way to differentiate mass-produced goods per se, it is an essential source of knowledge about how to be in the world. As such, the brand not only adds value, it holds powerful cultural authority.

Branding as a process does not simply proffer an elaborate buffet of identities from which we literally pick and choose, however. There is an element of agency or “individual style” to lifestyle, yet it is also produced via a shared “social style” that is determined by social location, including race, class, gender and age (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 140-148). Lifestyle, in this sense, is a product of the combination of the two—

individual and social. It is social because it is about our affiliations and connections with others; it is individual because people consider it an expression of unique identity within the social. Indeed, we adapt and make meaning from given social trends and styles.

Lifestyle is a foundational aspect of contemporary consumer identity. One performs, adapts and pursues the trappings of a particular way of being. Lifestyle is, in a sense, the consequence or outcome of the many daily choices, including purchases, we make in modern life (Giddens, 1991, p. 80-88). Choice in itself implies that lifestyle is bounded by socioeconomic means. But lifestyle is a “functional response” as David Chaney calls it (1996, p. 11) to modernity, and one that is organized explicitly around consumption. We identify with, and reject, particular practices and routines, from dress and food to cultural practices and music, to help define who we are. Such patterns stratify our social lives in terms of our belonging to a particular class or group that identifies through its material markers.

Product RED is an example of lifestyle and identity branding that presents itself as activism, ostensibly a higher purpose than other consumer-oriented identifications. It is “commodity activism” as Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser (2012) label the marriage of social action and merchandising. It is a marketing campaign, both for its own RED brand and for those of its corporate partners, each of which is enhanced by Bono’s brand as a celebrity. RED sells meaning and signification with none of its own material products attached. It relies upon the products that its corporate partners designate as RED and on the affective energies of those brands.

The corporate brands and RED are in a symbiotic relationship. RED feeds on its partners' brands to materialize the campaign and they feed on the RED brand as a production of corporate social responsibility. In a sense, social responsibility becomes a product, along with the material goods. The RED designation, to use a somewhat crude analogy, operates as a 'bonus' gift of social conscience that comes with each and every product. This is all very good business for the partner companies. As RED co-founder Shriver said in 2006 upon the launch of the campaign: "We sought out iconic companies who make iconic products. RED partners expect they will broaden their own customer base and increase loyalty in a manner that delivers a sustainable revenue stream to both the company and the Global Fund." (Bono tunes in, 2006). RED is a cross-promotional vehicle with a higher purpose.

These interconnected promotional relationships are predicated on RED's own hip, feel-good ethos and on Bono's star power. Though the AIDS pandemic in Africa seems a heartbreakingly intractable problem, RED avoids politics, proselytising or guilt. It is distinctly a campaign about having fun while supporting a good cause. It creates a space, as the website says, "where desire meets virtue" (RED n.d.). We not assaulted by painful images of suffering. Rather, RED invites us to use our own desires as consumers to feel fulfilled in helping those less fortunate. In fact, the campaign and partner companies appropriate Africa as a brand and a logo to produce virtuous desire. They enchant Africa, as I discuss later.

In both an ideal and rhetorical sense, consumption (or desire) occupies a different sphere than the more solemn realm of citizenship (or virtue). Desire, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, is "to have a strong wish for, to long for, covet, crave"

(Oxford, 2002). As a noun it is an emotion or condition directed at “some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected.” It is also a sensual appetite or lust. Virtue has to do with morality and the qualities of a moral life. It is related to “abstention on moral grounds of any wrongdoing or vice.” In other words one has to do with satisfying one’s longing, the other to do with the denial of longing. Desire is more about indulgence and virtue suggests discipline and restraint.

The juxtaposition of desire and virtue that propels the campaign promotion is prevalent in Western, and particularly U.S., society. A campaign slogan repeats: “Buy (RED) saves lives. It’s as simple as that. (RED) Desire and virtue. Together at last.” (Product RED, 2009) While virtue is associated with restraint of desire, as I argued, conspicuous consumption can be virtuous, the campaign and affiliated celebrities tell us. The slogan neatly embodies two competing discourses of American life. Desire fuels the consumption upon which the economy depends; virtue signifies steadfastness and individual denial that underpins the American Puritan myth of common-sense restraint and modesty. Here desire is virtuous because it is being channelled into a worthy cause. The rhetoric produces a self-referential notion of doing good works. It asks little of us in the way of political, emotional or temporal investment. The campaign binds desire and virtue together as branding slogan that serves as a moral and philosophical justification for its fund-raising model.

At times such positioning produces unfortunate results. One rather crass slogan from Starbucks said that buying its RED coffee is “A delicious way to help save lives” (Starbucks, n.d.). This statement, which suggests there is no effort required beyond the price of a cup of coffee, was removed from the site in 2010. Still, Bono and the campaign

repeatedly endorse such a *noblesse oblige* brand positioning. As the opening quote of this chapter implies, RED does not want people to squelch their desires but to channel them toward the “tremendous power” of consumption, to quote campaign’s current “manifesto” (About RED, n.d.). This sentiment is part of the RED identity of fashionable social consciousness, and one repeated by affiliated celebrities.

The Sledd video is an exemplar of the RED brand’s equating of desire with virtue. Other promotional materials explicitly speak to young consumers as well. The stable of RED products includes high-top sneakers, T-shirts, iPods, baby buggies and skateboards, all the uniform and accouterments of the under-35 demographic. RED branding, like all branding, seeks to generate desire for acceptance and belonging. At the same time RED hails consumers as “socially conscious bitches,” to quote Sledd, as part of its appeal to the hip and transgressive. The two, belonging and fashionable transgression, work together Sledd’s bitchy, playful video. He encourages young consumers to have the best of both worlds, namely to get their fashion up to scratch, at least by his estimation, and to use a cause as an ethical motivation. He presents it as win-win, a painless way to give and a responsible way to shop.

Product RED uses a number of discursive strategies to activate the two seemingly contradictory responses of desire and virtue. Primarily, it stitches the ideological mainstay of uniqueness that is essential to lifestyle branding onto the communitarian ideal that is vital for activism and philanthropy. This tension—between individuality and communality—is at the heart of the two senses of enchantment that Bennett and Ritzer put forward. One finds the potential to induce a spontaneous positive ethical comportment and the other sees rationalized enchantment as perpetually unsatisfying.

Bennett suggests enchantment can spring from our everyday encounters with modern life, with the marketplace specifically. For Ritzer, the marketplace manufactures enchantment to keep us in its thrall; it is a masquerade.

### **Celebritized Enchantment And Commodity Philanthropy**

In German sociologist Max Weber's account, modernity produces a rationalized, codified world that is at its core disenchanting, or alienating in Marxian terms, though Weber was at odds with Marx's economic leanings and with the stock Marx put in revolution as the cure for the ills of capitalism (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1958, pp. 46-50). Weber delineated between four types of rationality but he emphasized formal rationality, which he defined as the source of the laws, regulations and universal rules that guide our choices in modern Western life. Formal rationality is the source of rational-legal authority, the primary form of authority that he used to develop his theory of disenchantment. The other types are also foundational aspects of modernity and its valorization of codification, scientism, efficiency and statistical quantification. Practical rationality suggests an emphasis on the best means to do mundane everyday tasks. Theoretical rationality is the effort to codify reality in a cognitive sense. Substantive rationality suggests that we make choices based on the larger social values of the time (Gerth & Wright-Mills, 1958).

Both Ritzer's and Bennett's arguments about enchantment grow, albeit in different directions, partly out of Weber's belief that there is little opportunity for the magical and unexpected to flourish amid the rationality that comes out of the Enlightenment. Weber said that Western modernity is a triumph of rational-legal

authority over traditional authority, for example with hereditary rulers. It also negates charismatic authority, for example that which healers and magicians possessed.

Rationality is an “iron cage” (p. 155) that keeps out the formerly magical and unquantifiable, and locks us into a soulless existence of measurable efficiency. We are trapped by the “cold skeletal hands of rational orders” and by “the banality of everyday routine” (p. 347). Weber’s is a disenchantment story. All routes to the unexpected and mystical are closed off in the name of efficiency and order. Yet even Weber said rationalization, and the resulting disenchantment, is the necessary price of modern life. It enables a break from a more “savage” existence of the past (p. 139). Thus he was also telling a teleological progress story about the Euro-North American exit from primitivism as he lamented the loss of enchantment.

Twenty-first-century globalized capitalism is an outgrowth of the scientific processes of rationalization that Weber articulated. It is characterized by what Ritzer has famously called “*McDonaldization*” (2000), where the principles of fast-food making occupy ever-greater sectors of American society. Those principles include *efficiency*, procedures for ensuring the task at hand is done quickly, *calculability*, where all things including efficiency must be measurable, *predictability*, where consumers and all parties know exactly what to expect, as with a drive-through restaurant menu, and *control*, where all processes and human interactions are managed to conformity.

Capitalism, as a form and product of rationalization, fabricates enchantment in what Ritzer (2010) calls “the cathedrals of consumption.” The cathedrals include everything from shopping malls to cruise ships, casinos, discount stores, catalogues and even mega-churches and museums. Malls and other retail spaces are places to frolic, to

be entertained, and even in some cases to connect with nature, as with the climbing wall at the U.S. outdoor retailer REI. Companies fashion these spaces as communities for us in order to create a feeling of public space in the commercial realm.

Such spaces are not actually a public square designed for people to freely mingle and interact, where they might assemble for a good cause or even protest the actions of the state. They are private property, as Paco Underhill points out (2004 pp 29-35), although they come to feel like public spaces. Private developers want to create the feel of a town square in malls and commercial properties, however they police the public use of those spaces, and they are not truly public in terms of constitutional rights to free speech and assembly. These spaces have, in some cases in the suburbs, replaced the public zone. Ritzer considers them to be cathedrals that anchor what he calls the new means of consumption; they are essentially factories for the creation of desire and need. Commercial spaces are a form of rational-legal authority, in Weberian terms, that bring commerce and citizenship together.

Ritzer draws on Jean Baudrillard's (1993) notion of consumption as "social labour" to explain how the cathedrals both stimulate consumption and change the ways in which we consume. One-stop megastores, self-serve banks, theme restaurants and shops, unmediated and impersonal shopping experiences are just a few examples of how our relationship with goods and services has changed. The new means of consumption are fuelled by a financial system of credit, ATMs, loans, the internet and other digital technologies. From interstate highways to commercial jets to computers, technological change enhances the dominance of these new means of consumption (2010, p. 29).

Online and other technologies aid the transition from a capitalism born of industrial production to one maintained by consumption.

Baudrillard (1993) argues that labour no longer necessarily needs to produce anything as in Marx's analysis. It is "service labour," indistinguishable from free time because we are always working for capital. For him, a worker's key function in society is to consume "as an obligatory social service" (p. 19) in order to expand capital. In other words, we need free time in the current mode of capitalism so that we can buy the goods that have value as exemplars of our place within the social structure. Baudrillard disputes the modern cultural narrative that work and leisure are different, and that leisure is freedom. Leisure, he argues, "is as productive as labour" (p. 28). For capital to expand it can no longer focus on production; it must create needs and wants, and leisure time in which to fulfill them. Wages do not relate to the value of work in terms of production; they are signs of status. They are "a sacrament" and "the sign of obedience to the rule of capital" (p. 19), essentially gifted to the worker so that s/he will consume.

Ritzer's cathedrals play a mediating role for the subject in advanced capitalism; they are the sites people perform consumption labour. Ritzer, in accord with Baudrillard, finds that those who own the "means of consumption" now have power akin to those who owned the means of production in Marx's analysis. "That is, just as the means of production are those entities that make it possible for the proletariat to produce commodities and to be controlled and exploited as workers, the means of consumption are defined as those things that make it possible for people to acquire goods and services for the same people to be controlled and exploited as consumers" (2010, p. 50). In a sense, the cathedrals are like factories that produce consumers.

As with religious cathedrals, which are a container for organized faith, the cathedrals of consumption are highly rationalized vessels that contain and organize consumer life. To *produce* enchantment, which is the crux of Ritzer's argument, they must be efficient. They therefore incorporate the dimensions of rationality—efficiency, calculability and predictability, and control—into the procedures and policies that govern human interaction. Non-human technologies, from bar codes to laser scanners to automated receiving and distribution systems in retail help create efficiency, not so much for the consumer but for the market place. Malls, retail shops and other cathedrals are cluttered with merchandize and diversions to delay passers by. Merchants fill their shops with sounds and smells and samples that overwhelm the senses. They create an enchanted world that invites consumers to suspend their chaotic lives and immerse themselves in a themed fantasy where identity and lifestyle await.

These cathedrals produce a strange paradox, though. Enchantment is supposed to be antithetical to the calculable world of Weber's modernity. But to produce an enchanted world, the cathedrals must be made efficient. This is the irrationality of rationality for Ritzer; rationalized institutions are inherently alienating (2010, p. 84). They must be continually re-enchanted to keep the customer enthralled. Cathedral environments must be changed, improved and expanded to delight the senses, to reproduce the thrill and, of course, to ensure consumption. Therefore "the magic must be systematized so that it can be easily re-created from one time or place to another." The challenge becomes how to maintain this form of enchantment in the face of disenchanting rationalization and consumer resignation about hypercommercialization and an endless cycle of need.

Amid this drive to consumption, Bennett's intervention essentially theorizes something the RED campaign hinges upon to create its relationship with the consumer and hence its cultural authority. Bennett's (2001) argument that we can find joy and be moved to constructive ethical comportment in our quotidian encounters with the marketplace depends upon the assertion that we, as modern subjects, can experience spontaneous magic in our affective relationships with commodities. A creative television commercial, for example, can lift us into a state of wonder that can have an impact on our broader ethical relations. Such branded rhetoric, when it is positive and upbeat, is a better source of ethical behaviour and social motivation than is fear and negativity (2001, p. 12-13). We can use those moments of unexpected pleasure as an impetus to positive benefit even as we acknowledge that branding is a form of persuasion to make us buy. She is arguing that the persuasive strategies of branding, regardless of marketers' intentions, can genuinely produce enchantment.

To be clear, Bennett's book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, is not wholly centred on consumption. Her project is to identify the "wonder of minor experiences," which is the title of her first chapter. It is a call to be moved by the everyday. She gestures to Buddhist ideas (p. 115) that we can find joy and contentment in the present moment and turn it outward into the world. She is looking for enchantment in all manner of sensory experiences as a counterweight to the "disenchantment" tale of modernity. In one chapter, she takes up the question of whether such feelings and actions can issue from the commercial realm. She is not arguing that commodities *do* produce enchantment, only that they *can*. They can also engender narcissism and

selfishness, she admits (p. 148). She sees the pitfalls of a social order based upon desire, but argues that this order does not have a determinant impact on ethical life.

Her project is “to fight enchantment with enchantment” (p. 110). She analyses, for example, a television advertisement for the retailer Gap to explore the question of whether her materialist enchantment can issue from commodities and/or discourse about them. In the ad, young people wearing khakis dance to the Louis Prima song *Jump, Jive and Wail*, as the camera freezes the dancers in mid flight, and as the room itself also spins and swings. This is her primary case for her argument, that joyful encounters with consumer life can be a good source of affective energy for positive ethical comportment.

She agrees with critiques that corporations aim to produce an affective connection to service their brands (p. 113). And she acknowledges Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish, that we come to believe that value is housed in the commodity itself rather than in the labour that produced it (or in our desire for it). She acknowledges that there is a risk that a strong affective connection to the brand normalizes the commodity fetish. But she argues that since capitalism is the prevailing economic order “[i]t makes sense to use whatever ethical resource might be derived from commercial culture and to pursue an ecology that draws positive sustenance from the moods and energies engendered by some modes of advertisement” (p. 115). She views consumers as agents. They make meaning from commodities and, though she does not state it in this way, they derive identity in part from a commoditized world. The exchange relationship is not exclusively about the creation of desire. Bennett wants to “deny capitalism quite the degree of efficacy and totalizing power” that many accounts ascribe to it. We can

cultivate inventive possibilities related to consumption, and in the process reform commodity culture and extract its potential.

Her argument, that commodities and their artistic representations in advertising are potential sources of enchantment that can “fuel an ethical will” (p. 114), is contra Horkheimer and Adorno (2001), who are among the most strident critics of the enchanting effects of consumer culture. The Frankfurt School sees mass culture as akin to the industrial Fordist assembly line, which mass produced cars and other consumer goods. With mass production and consumption, culture became an industry that changed the nature of artistic expression and consumption. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that this commodification increases the ability of the culture industry to produce, control and discipline the needs and desires of consumers (p. 144). The culture industry, they argued, robs individuals of their own critical function in the consumption process.

Bennett argues that Horkheimer and Adorno fail to imagine “a moment of affinity between commodity fascination and wonder at the world” (p. 123). In other words their error is to see no human agency in mass mediated commercial life. They do not distinguish between amusement and enchantment, and their analyses do not account for affect, she argues. By giving so much power to the culture industry and almost none to “minor pleasures and inspirations” that exist in the world, they have essentially rejected the potential of positive ethical impulses to bring about change. While she does not engage Ritzer directly, one can imagine her making similar arguments with his analysis.

Bennett’s search for enchantment, as some kind of ‘authentic’ inspiration to be extracted from the quotidian is a valuable project. Yet it does not hold up to the persuasive, and sometimes manipulative, strategies of branding. She brackets, rather

than accounts for, the power of branding as I described it above. RED is actually constructing, building, manipulating the kind of enchantment that Bennett suggests we might feel organically, as was the Gap advertisement of her example. Branding is at its core an intensive outside intervention to construct personal lifestyle through the creation of desire. The fundamental aim of consumer capitalism—to make us *need* products and services in order to fashion our identities—stands in the way of Bennett’s organic spontaneous sense of wonder. Her enchantment is incommensurate with the end goals of marketing, which include strategies that play explicitly on our social insecurities (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006).

I have elaborated Bennett’s position because if any encounter with the commercial realm can fuel the agentful enchantment she argues for, it is the Product RED campaign, with its celebritized, philanthropic *raison d’être*. The RED website and publicity materials are chock-full of upbeat imagery and videos about products and people designed to inspire a sensation of unexpected delight in the viewer. Converse and Chocolate Skateboards (Chocolate 2011) produced a video that provides an example akin to Bennett’s Gap case. It features professional skateboarder Anthony Pappalardo, for whom the companies are corporate sponsors. In the three-minute video he performs his two most beloved activities, skating and woodworking. He skates through the streets of Brooklyn, skillfully traversing urban obstacles and pedestrians. The soundtrack is the upbeat, and vaguely African, strains of a song called *Early Warnings* by the California folk-rock band Foreign Born. The video is a high production value short about Pappalardo; it contains just a few product-placement-style shots, including the skater wearing Converse Product RED shoes.

Pappalardo's single reference to the RED campaign comes mid-way: "The cool thing about working with Product RED is that by just doing the two things that I love, I'm also able to help people." The video does not use a narrator or video captions to appeal to consumers. It is essentially a lifestyle advertisement. It reads like a soft news feature that might come at the end of a network nightly news broadcast. Neither Pappalardo nor the sponsoring companies ask the viewer to support the campaign or buy products. They *show* the audience, a young, mostly male, consumer base of skaters, an attractive lifestyle. Bennett acknowledges that this type of commercial production is a form of persuasion. In her conception the target audience might feel some spontaneity and inspiration at Pappalardo's story, and might be motivated beyond simple consumption to a higher ethical purpose in the larger scheme of things.

As this example suggests, RED's project of social change through consumption is a rich case for exploring the competing notions of enchantment described here—Bennett's sense of wonder that issues from within and Ritzer's rationalized production of enchantment manufactured from without. RED deploys celebrity and celebritized production (as with the Pappalardo video) to produce enchantment as branded cultural authority. I argue that the RED case demonstrates how Bennett's approach to enchantment, at least in her analysis of commodities, buys in to the strategies of rationalized enchantment. It does not account for how individual acts (or discourses) of consumption (and lifestyle) can inspire either an individual or collective response. RED plays on the production of lifestyle and identity discussed above. As such it is not activating a communal motivation as much as it is fuelling desire and insecurity about social stratification.

Bennett's approach in seeing agency for the consumer does not account for the power relations at play in the mediatized publicity of consumer capitalism. Nor does it account for material desire as a means of persuasion. It does not broach how her example, the Gap ad, can be read as or converted to a positive intervention on even a small scale. It lacks a structural component that lifts it beyond the personal. As such the enchantment of Bennett's analysis asserts commerce as a source of social-political power. It normalizes atomized individualized responses to social issues, which this project argues against. In the final analysis the search for enchantment within the commercial realm reproduces the relations of global capitalism at home, just as the celebritized aid abroad reproduces globalization on distant shores, as I argued in Chapter 2.

RED is complex because of the problem of AIDS it seeks to remedy. The campaign entwines discourses of individuality and collectivity, and spins them around a story about rebellion. This construction, in the end, produces a rationalized enchantment, an ethos of individualism that it packages as consumer activism. Celebrity brings authoritative power to the admixture of citizenship and consumption that RED binds together. Ritzer's account leans toward a rigid Frankfurt School-inflected analysis that Bennett pushes back against. But hers is equally an enchantment that marketers, including those of the RED campaign, intentionally try to create.

To expand this argument about the process of commodity enchantment I discuss how RED generates its authority by appealing to consumers via the rational and the affective simultaneously. It cultivates a sense of expert authority as it also produces enchantment. In conspicuously branding itself as rebellious, yet compassionate, RED

produces an audience that fancies itself fiercely individualistic and yet engaged in a project of social change. This carefully managed and produced form of cultural authority provides a case study for my argument about the production of enchantment within consumer life. Product RED's Africa and "Africanness" are racially fraught, as I argued in chapter 2, and the campaign brands Africa itself for the identification of consumers.

### **"You're Now EMPOWE(RED)!: Selling Activism To Consumers**

Product RED's cultural authority flows from its celebratized notion of activist identity. It invites consumers to adopt a persona by purchasing designated items. The campaign and its partner companies generate significant media publicity that lauds its effort to harness the marketplace to do good works. RED is the subject of feature reports and interviews that highlight Bono and other associated celebrities. In all of these realms of publicity the campaign negotiates continually between individuality and communality, between citizen and consumer identities, while also conflating the two. It does so in two ways: firstly by deploying the expert voice as an appeal to rationality, and secondly by using celebrity to enchant and activate an emotional response. Both strategies enhance RED's, and Bono's, persuasive authority regarding AIDS in Africa. Most of the ads and other publicity materials are not as cheeky as the William Sledd video, but they do deploy these two elements—expert voice and a kind of enchanted pleasure that is meant to enthrall.

## **Branding expert voice: Media and statistical panic**

RED's prolific use of the expert voice stands in for context or history about AIDS in Africa and its varied effects across the continent. It uses unattributed factoids, such as: "Every day an estimated 4,100 men, women and children die in sub-Saharan Africa from this preventable treatable disease (RED, 2009). The site provides statistics on how many people have HIV/AIDS, the fact that an estimated 5,205 people in Africa contract the virus daily, that 67 per cent of all HIV-positive people in the world are in Africa, and so on. Just two pills a day at a cost of 40 cents can keep an infected person healthy, it says. These stand-alone statements are part of RED's claim on the authority to characterize the problem and declare a solution through commercial means. RED makes frequent and strategic use of facts and figures, always simplified as they are in advertising copy. It links to organizations, such as the Global Fund, World Vision, UNAIDS, The One Campaign (a sister organization set up by Bono), connections that signify the expertise upon which RED is legitimated.

The campaign claims to have helped the Global Fund prevent more than 2.5 million deaths from HIV-AIDS in Africa. In this instance it directly invokes the voice of expertise: "The Global Fund is an acknowledged expert and leader in financing the fight against AIDS and (RED) partnered with the Fund to help invest (RED) money on the ground because of the Fund's track record and its focus on grant performance and results." The Global Fund, which disburses the RED money, is a public-private partnership begun by G-8 governments and backed by billionaire capitalist Bill Gates. The fund is tied to global institutions such as the World Bank (Bond, 2006). It has been

beset by its own fraud scandal in which money was stolen away from its intended use for helping people with AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis (cf. Leppard, 2007; Cohen, 2008).

The campaign's strategy of liberally sprinkling facts and figures through its publicity is a highly persuasive contemporary convention. Statistics are ubiquitous. They invite no argument and appear to be above reproach. They are "the very atmosphere we breathe, the strange weather in which we live, the continuous emission of postmodern media life," Kathleen Woodward says (1999, p. 180). They hail us in the Athusserian sense and they work alongside the anecdote as "the pervasive conventions of media culture." Statistics predict the future, frequently in such a way as to induce foreboding, and they quantify the past. They measure successes and failures and tell us about ourselves. Woodward argues that they are so pervasive as to be a source of "statistical stress" or, in extreme cases, "statistical panic" (p. 181). I follow her argument that statistics are a particular "structure of feeling" in contemporary life, as she uses Raymond Williams's phrase. That is, they can point to emergent social relations and structure of feeling can serve as the basis for a hypothesis about a thing or phenomenon felt or observed, as well as a method to examine it. In this case the structure of feeling is a "mediatized, marketized and medicalized culture in which the notion of being at risk has assumed dominant proportions." We are meant to be jarred—into action or inertia it is not clear—by the incessant quantification of both problems and solutions. Statistics create their own cultural authority.

The media are a dominant purveyor of the statistical structure of feeling that Woodward describes. Advertising relies heavily on statistics, as do the mainstream news media. The RED Campaign facts and figures are easy fodder for news accounts. They

appear to quantify the problem without the need of further research or contextualization. As Woodward's work suggests, statistics work in tandem with the anecdote to produce journalistic cultural authority and the two are prominent in celebrity media campaigns. News coverage deploys the expert voice, by citing statistics and through narrative or anecdote, in a way that reinforces the authority and credibility of journalist and newsmaker. It is one way that journalism as a genre leans heavily on expertise to construct and maintain its authority.

Mainstream news organizations are at pains to remind the audience that philanthropic celebrities are not just a "pretty face" of the cause; they have legitimate (sanctioned) knowledge about their social issues. They lend credibility to the statistics and they are at the ready with cogent facts and figures about the problem and the solution. News coverage provides a platform for this quantitative information that celebrities blend skillfully with the anecdote. News publicity is not separate from branding in the case of celebrity philanthropy. The celebrity and all s/he brings to news coverage of a social cause is wholly an aspect of its branding. It plays an integral role in the marriage of consumption and citizenship in the fact that it is a legitimizing genre of publicity, as the celebrity news interviews cited in Chapter 2 suggest.

The *Fast Company* article in that chapter demonstrates the news media's role in creating the expert voice of the celebrity, in that case Matt Damon, to help give the cause its brand identity. Damon cites facts and figures about the issues relating to water: nearly one billion people lack clean water; Water.org is on track to raise \$10 million, and so on. Similarly, news stories about the work of actors from Sean Penn in Haiti to George Clooney in Africa make a point of affirming the celebrity's deep commitment and expert

knowledge of facts and figures. They often quote a politician or another authority figure that the audience is likely to recognize (Heller 2011) in order to produce the celebrity as expert. News reports cite Clooney extensively as an expert on Darfur, on genocide and on the politics of the Sudan in general (cf. Avlon, 2011; Baldauf 2010, Diehl, 2010, King 2010). Journalists quote other celebrities, from Oprah Winfrey to Angelina Jolie, from Don Cheadle to Alec Baldwin as experts in the causes they espouse and/or fund.

The mainstream media cite Bono as one of the foremost specialists on global poverty, debt and AIDS. His expertise is entwined with RED as a brand and with his celebrity brand. News reports refer to him as a knowledgeable insider who hails both powerful leaders and the public to the cause, as I elaborated earlier. In 2006, NBC's Brian Williams followed Bono on a tour of several African countries, a junket to publicize the RED campaign. In one *Nightly News* report he told of Bono's visit that day to the West African country of Ghana where he said the rock star "mixed humanity with policy (Williams, *Out of Africa*, 2006). In the two-minute report, Williams says Bono is greeted as a visiting head of government as the video shows pictures of the rock star meeting with the (unidentified) president of Ghana. "He considers these high-level meetings a necessity but he prefers to approach the problem at the ground level," Williams says in the voiceover before the shot cuts to Bono mingling with children and calling them "royal" and "the most beautiful kids on earth."

A year later in 2007, Williams went again to Africa with Bono and produced a number of special reports about the RED campaign's impact in its first year. Williams took up the cause as an advocate for the commercial model under the umbrella of an on-location news report. After they returned, he featured Bono and RED on the *NBC Nightly*

*News* segment called *Making a Difference*. The regular feature highlights people from all walks of life who instigate positive change. It bills itself as a popular part of the news broadcast that “profiles ordinary people doing extraordinary things to help their neighbors” (NBC Nightly News Facebook, 2012). The segment signals to the audience, and to the interview subject, that the coverage will be conversational and upbeat. The positive tone signals “soft news” human-interest narratives about innovators and community-minded individuals, everyday heroes who rise above the ordinary.

Bono is no “ordinary” person, to be sure. In the interview, Williams (2007) describes the campaign as a success in its first year; it raised \$47 million through the sale of RED products. He asks Bono if he has a message for the 2008 presidential candidates out of his experiences in Africa. Bono responds:

I’ve met with pretty much all of the candidates, spoken with them all. The place where the fight against extreme poverty connects with them, strangely, is in the war on terror. There’s a real feeling in America that the world does not understand what America’s about. Tackling global health problems and extreme poverty problems, meeting people where they live and trying to solve their problems for them, affords America the chance to redescribe itself to the world at a time when that might be very, very smart” (Williams, 2007).

Here Bono uses his brand to leverage the goals of Product RED in the context of a political campaign. He does rhetorical work to link a distant global issue to the at-home preoccupations of Americans. He draws a bead between consumption and citizenship, deploying his cultural authority through the mainstream news media. Williams uses Bono as an expert voice and source of knowledge about the causes of and ‘cures’ for the AIDS pandemic in Africa and about presidential politics.

Bono deploys the U.S. mythology of American exceptionalism rhetorically to speak to the country's own ideals of itself as a global citizen. He appeals to the exceptionalist perspective that America has both the authority and obligation to "solve their problems for them." This interview takes place against the backdrop of waning support for the Iraq-Afghanistan wars both at home and abroad. America has a chance, he suggests, to redeem itself on the world stage. It is an apparent win-win if the United States uses the AIDS health crisis in Africa to resume its rightful place as global moral leader.

In the interview, Bono states that he wants the products, not his celebrity, to be in the spotlight. He centres the commodity along with United States' self-defined culture of moral exceptionalism. His political statement is a kind of branded expertise. He is legitimated via mainstream news's uncritical uptake of him as an expert and enhanced by the affective energies of RED's publicity of the campaign and the partner brands. The report combines this expert voice with a well of affective mainstream publicity that serves the dual aims of desire and virtue. Bono manages to be diplomat and salesman at the same time, as with the Louis Vuitton advertisement (2010) from Chapter 2.

Louis Vuitton constructed the 2010 edition of its Core Values campaign on Bono's recognized credibility as an expert on Africa, which he has derived partly from Product RED and the laudatory media publicity about it. In the widely circulated campaign photograph Bono and his wife Ali Hewson don her Edun "sustainable" fashion line and carry luxury Vuitton bags off of a small airplane somewhere in the African savannah. The Louis Vuitton campaign is not a cause marketing effort; it does not give profit to charity, though the "core values" moniker subtly suggests that it does. Just prior to the Bono-

Hewson shoot, the couple sold a 49 per cent stake in the money-losing Edun fashion line to LVMH group, the parent of Louis Vuitton (Brodie, 2012). Yet in a related video by the producers of the Bono-Hewson shoot, Bono identifies this commercial work as “activism” (Vuitton, 2010). He and Hewson suggest it is part of their promotion of Africa as a “trade destination.”



**Figure 3.2. Hewson & Bono. Louis Vuitton Core Values – by Annie Leibovitz**

In the online Vuitton video, Bono and Hewson promote trade with Africa, suggesting that the Edun line of clothing is an effort to do that in “some small way,” (Vuitton, 2010). “That’s what the Africans always say to us. They want trade above aid,” Bono says. The couple articulate this obvious conflict of interest, their promotion of their money-losing brand as activism, in the name of free trade. They leverage their own brand through a large luxury corporation and Bono deploys his brand as a celebrity

activist explicitly in the name of his family's financial interests. They completely marry activism and commerce, more explicitly than even the RED campaign does.

The Louis Vuitton "core values" campaign is part of the company's approach to lifestyle marketing. It solicits celebrities and over the years has included the likes of Sean Connery, Francis and Sophia Coppola, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards, and more recently Angelina Jolie. Core Values has the feel of a cause marketing effort or a corporate social responsibility campaign. For example Jolie, photographed in Cambodia, is featured on the company website talking about how she became aware of landmines during an on-location film shoot there. Yet the campaign is not promoting charity or raising money for the landmine cause. Jolie's authority as a UN ambassador, fuelled by interviews like the Anderson Cooper special in Chapter 2 (Cooper, 2006), brand her and her brand services Vuitton's lifestyle branding.

These examples demonstrate how the vocational crossings I discussed in Chapter 1 do their work. The news is bound up with the branding of both cause and celebrity in these examples of philanthropy, activism and cause marketing. Promotional news coverage services the brands of all concerned and the celebrity services the journalistic brand. As in Anderson Cooper's interview with Angelina Jolie in Chapter 2, the two are branding and selling Africa and adding value to their own brands in a synergistic exchange. An essential aspect of such cross promotion is the uncritical, promotional nature of the journalism as regards celebrity. As I have argued above, this expert voice is an important element in creating this form of branded cultural authority. Below I examine the celebritized emotional element that enchants the RED project.

## **Branding Emotion: Creating A Movement of Individuals**

In addition to its use of the expert voice to frame the campaign as activism, RED does work to imbue its brand with pathos. It cultivates a resonance with the consumer that does not issue from facts and figures. In order to maintain its positioning as “hard commerce” (Bono tunes in, 2006) the campaign avoids emotional appeals to guilt and pity. Rather, it creates two upbeat, and seemingly contradictory, narratives: of cool individuality that connects it with youth culture and of a communitarian ethos that propels the campaign’s stance as an instrument of global social change. It invites consumers to envision themselves as part of an “interpretive community” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 145) of like-minded individuals with a social conscience. The campaign negotiates this contradiction by offering its audience branded expressions of personality, taste and conscience. It creates a narrative wherein millions of individuals who have no proximal contact can feel part of a consumer movement. The website is replete with references, such as those on the home page, that say: “Be part of the solution” or “Join (RED) now:”

“Join us now and help eliminate AIDS in Africa. You will be the first to receive updates on (RED) products, receive special offers only available to members and learn about all the ways your purchases are making an impact. (RED) is working because of your support” (Product RED, 2010).

The above statement was located on a part of the site titled “Take Action.” It links the individual and the social through the idea that joining is a collective gesture, but one that signifies insider status. Belonging, as a discourse of identity, is a symbolic move that encourages a sense of importance, which plays on people’s anxieties about social location and belonging (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). To join is to be admitted to

something special. This small gesture of insider status none the less helps to construct a sense of using personal difference and standing in the name of a public cause. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Stuart Hall's argument that identity is constructed through difference, in juxtaposition with others who are not like us, is key here. Those differences are based on categories such as race, class, and gender (1996), and also on nationality, religion, ethnicity and the like. This branding encourages one to seek personal distinction, even in the context of a campaign that is meant to be about others.

On the "Take Action" page are links to three sub-pages: Join, Discover and Participate. From Join, the campaign asks us to "Sign up to be a part of the (RED) community. We'll keep you involved with emails, offers, behind the scenes info and news. You'll be plugged into the latest from (RED)." At this point one can fill in a name and email address and begin receiving promotions. From there the link is to Participate, where we are told: "You are now empowe(RED)! Get involved and take action yourself. Show your belief in the (RED) idea and pass your support along to others in your social sphere." The empowerment involves downloading RED computer wallpaper, badges and banners, and presumably sharing them with others. One can also join social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter.

The action on the "Take Action" section of the site is a matter of passing the link on to others. The site users here make no public statement by joining, as there is no further action required, or even possible. In the end, there is the potential that "members" might share their enthusiasm through social interaction, in private conversations or social networking. But this is not the point. The feeling of empowerment and belonging are paramount here. These pages represent an expression of *belief*, according to the

campaign. They are part of the construction of enchantment that imbues RED with a higher political, social and almost spiritual purpose.

RED consumers have nowhere to express or act upon that higher purpose, no space in which to speak out. It brings to mind the anecdote in Christine Harold's *Our Space* (2007), in which she describes an encounter with what seemed like an ironic activist campaign by Diesel jeans. The company website allowed people to sign up, become members and then post their own subversive slogans to the Diesel website. But in fact the slogans only appeared to be posted; they only appeared on the user's version of the website. It was a closed loop of one, designed to collect customer data. While RED is claiming an activist purpose beyond its commercial structure, unlike Diesel, it is also a closed loop. RED does not publicize these members or explain how their joining constitutes meaningful "support." It costs nothing and RED does not explain how signing up constitutes a meaningful gesture of support. One can share RED logos, computer wallpaper and such, or perhaps "Like" the campaign on Facebook, but that is the extent of the interaction between those who have joined. The purpose of the web pages titled Join and Take Action is to create a sense of purpose and emotional attachment beyond the "hard commerce" (Bono Tunes in, 2006). And, as with Diesel, it creates a mailing list. My email inbox has been filling with regular updates from the campaign during the course of this project.

RED's methods of enchantment include what Eric Jenkins (2008) calls the "technique of the Orthodox icon" in order to create an experience for the consumer that rises above commerce. Jenkins argues that the Apple Corporation creates a cult following, and avoids the iconoclastic backlash that tends to follow, by lifting its

products (through various persuasive means including visual advertising) into a spiritual realm. It balances the spiritual and the material, the abstract and concrete, making its products, in this case the iPod, take on the iconic meaning of a spiritual immersion in music (p. 477). Apple fashions its iconic self as participatory and ritualistic to inspire a cult following (p. 467). Thus Apple can be an escape, a respite, almost a place of worship, and not a soulless megacorporation. RED's Join and Take Action pages, and other aspects of the campaign, all make similar rhetorical moves. Even if one does not navigate the series of clicks within these sections of the site, they signify the adherence to something larger than commerce; they signify social engagement and consumer power. And they have the backing of famous people.

These affective moves work in tandem with RED's deployment of hard facts and the expert voice to produce its cultural authority. In order to constitute consumer empowerment as an outlet for belief RED and its partners trade heavily on tropes of rebellion. Once they have created a sense of belonging, they *enchant* consumers as free-spirited individuals who go against the grain. Yet RED circles back to a communitarian stance by branding the African continent itself as an exotic place of great beauty and great need. Both of these seemingly contradictory discourses—individualism and communality—drive consumption, which is the ultimate goal of the project. One of the enchanting strategies is to brand the continent of Africa itself, and its diverse peoples as logos of the campaign and partner companies' products. As I argued in Chapter 2, RED puts people on display alongside the material goods that make up the product line. Below I extend the discussion about branded emotion by examining how rebellion and

individualism are entwined with communality to produce an affective resonance that produces the campaign's enchanted, celebritized cultural authority.

### **Enchanting Punk Rock And Hard Commerce: Branding Rebellion**

RED consistently promotes rebellion as an identity marker through its publicity pages and through those of its corporate partners. It is a theme through many iterations of the campaign website. Early on, the campaign urged buyers to join the "RED Revolution" (Worth, 2006). When Bono launched it 2006 he purposefully distinguished RED from the softer associations of philanthropy:

Philanthropy is like hippie music, holding hands. Red is more like punk rock, hip-hop; this should feel like hard commerce. People see a world out of whack. They see the greatest health crisis in 600 years and they want to do the right thing, but they're not sure what that is. Red is about doing what you enjoy and doing good at the same time (Bono tunes in, 2006).

This framing characterizes the campaign as hard-edged and transgressive, yet socially conscious. Hippie music is about old-fashioned charity. Punk is, in this framing, a commercial transaction, but one that rejects the status quo. It is an odd distinction, since punk's roots are firmly in the disaffection of the working class, in reaction to the excesses of mainstream rock music and the neoconservative politics of Thatcherism (cf. Hebdidge, 1979). Yet here Bono equates the pursuit of material happiness with punk, a subculture that spoke back against hedonistic excess. He essentially appropriates punk, takes it out of its context, in order to enchant his project as one that gives the middle finger to the man and takes matters into its own hands.

Numerous scholars have written about corporate co-optation of countercultural forms (cf. Heath & Potter, 2004; Harold, 2007; Frank, 1997). Nike (and its subsidiary

Converse) is among the big brands that mine the rich seam of African American hip-hop culture. Its exploitation of subculture is part of what Klein calls the “gold rush to poverty” that began in the 1980s (2000, pp. 73-76). The fashion industry discovered how lucrative it could be to sell the poor and working-class urban lifestyle that grows out of disaffection and “making do,” to quote de Certeau (1984), to privileged suburban youth. Bono is branding punk and hip-hop, both countercultural styles of dress and music that at times have been deemed dangerous, in much the same way that multinational corporations such as Nike have done. He expressly distinguishes his project from the 1960s hippie countercultural movement. RED is not Joan Baez and *Kumbaya*, but Converse-sponsored Kid Cudi and *Pursuit of Happiness*.

The campaign website features a “Manifesto” that enjoins consumers to use their “tremendous power” to buy things but to see their act as part of a collective. “When you do the (RED) thing, a (RED) partner will give up some of its profits to fight AIDS. It’s as simple as that.” An earlier version of the Manifesto was more pointed: “if they don’t get the pills they will die” (Perry, 2008). These declarative statements are like revolutionary slogans; they are simple, concise and memorable. Consumption is an act of rebellion, in this view, and for RED it is rooted in individuality that can be converted to collective action. The use of the word “manifesto” suggests a political movement that will coalesce to disrupt the status quo.

The manifesto is, of course, a modern form of communication historically associated with rebellion and political revolution. Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (1998), perhaps the most famous example of a political document, sought to conjure a public of aggrieved workers that had not yet coalesced. Its aim was to give

voice and political direction to the workers, the proletariat, of the industrial revolution, and it formed the basis for state-communist struggles such as the Russian Revolution. The RED manifesto is likewise working to conjure a public, or rather a consumer base. It uses the manifesto as a symbol of voice for the oppressed and playing on the countercultural meaning in which such a declaration is, from the perspective of those in power, unsanctioned and even treasonous.

The manifesto has a dual quality, Janet Lyon (1999) argues. It is a form of plain speech that is designed to frame the beliefs of those who have been overlooked and suppressed in modernity. It rallies publics for the purpose of winning liberation and acceptance into political, social and institutional spheres of life. Yet the manifesto also produces a rhetoric of exclusivity in order to conjure its public. It does the work of “parcelling out political identities” that polarize complex discourses. It claims a moral high ground of “us” versus “them.” The manifesto is a response to the universalizing rhetoric of the post-Enlightenment period. It is a public response to the modern “universal” subject, one that both seeks admittance and delineates difference.

This distinction that Lyon articulates plays out in RED’s use of the manifesto as a marketing tool. Brands and advertisers liberally appropriate it, and the “rebel” identity associated with it, along with the notion of revolution. While revolution indicates the overthrow of a government or social order, rebellion is an uprising, usually violent and on a smaller scale. RED uses them interchangeably. Heath and Potter (2004) argue that advertisers have long tapped into public identification with rebellion. In that sense, rebellion has always been entrepreneurial, anchored in the notion that countercultural identity is that thing directly related to what we buy. “Rebellion is one of the most

powerful sources of distinction in the modern world. As a result people are willing to pay good money for a piece of it, just as they are willing to pay for access to any other form of social status” (p. 175). It is this sense of rebellion that many of the RED partner companies cultivate. Either way, consumerism is about a flight from “sameness,” as Thomas Frank points out (1997, p. 34). Our identification with difference and transgression is the essence of branding of identical products.

Yet the campaign and its partners repurpose rebellion, file off its rough edges, as part of the enchantment. Nike-owned Converse allows people to create their own (RED) designs (RED, 2009) as an act of rebellion, but for a noble purpose that is above reproach. As Geoff Cottrill, chief marketing officer for Converse stated on the company’s RED website:

“Rebellion, individuality and creativity have always been at the heart of the Converse brand. Our relationship with the (RED) organization as a founding partner has allowed us to connect globally with consumers, designers and artists who share our philosophy that you can turn art into power and make a tangible difference in the world, one pair of shoes at a time” (Cottrill, 2009).

Here rebellion and individual style are not at odds with RED’s fund-raising mission. In fact, individuality is essential to making a social impact under the corporate model. Converse becomes a meeting place or receptacle for consumers, designers and artists with a shared view of making a “tangible difference in the world” through the sale and purchase of shoes. In this sense, collective action is to be achieved in the service of one’s self-concept as unique, rebellious and cool. The project and the custom-designed goods that signify insider status can enchant us, help us do good. The outsiders, those who

have not joined, purchased, displayed in some way the fact that they are believers in the RED revolution, are by implication outside the definition of hip and rebellious.

Converse markets its RED running shoes as art rather than as commodities. That characterization alone gives them a quasi-spiritual quality, an “aura” of uniqueness and transcendence in Walter Benjamin’s (2006) terms. They have a perceived authenticity in that they are ‘art.’ They are not just shoes, not just mass-marketed goods; they are an artistic urban street symbol of the collective power of a counterculture. They are a creative expression of activism. The aura, in Benjamin’s dialectical analysis, is not an actually existing state but a sort of cult value. Its value is in its simultaneous closeness and distance. It is present but just beyond reach, which is how it maintains its ideological force. The aura exists in relationship to what is lost or lacking for Benjamin. In his case it was the mechanical (re)production of culture that enabled us to see the aura, and potentially use that discovery as a source of critique and resistance. But we also recreate the aura; we desire it as a state of transcendence and as a symbol of authenticity, or of something lost.

Converse further develops this theme of commodity-as-art-as-aura in a 2010 excerpt from the RED site:

...Converse has been using their singular creativity to help eliminate AIDS in Africa since 2006. They know, and we agree, that rebellion, individuality and creative energy are powerful vehicles for change.

...Converse commissioned 100 musicians, graphic and graffiti artists from all over the world to create one-of-a-kind sneaker designs inspired by the global fight against HIV and AIDS in Africa.

Converse also recently launched the African Canvas collection of Chuck Taylor® All Star® shoes, made from canvas sourced in Africa.

And you can customize your own (PRODUCT) RED sneakers online with their “MAKE MINE RED” platform.... 5-15% (depending on the product

sold) of the net sales of Converse (PRODUCT) RED shoes goes directly to the Global Fund (Converse, 2010).



Figure 3.3 Converse (RED) African canvas collection

The shoes, as art, rise above mass production and become auratic. Converse creates their transcendent quality rhetorically against something they are not, which in this case is crass mass-marketed commercial goods. These shoes are created by artists, including seemingly transgressive “graffiti artists” who speak back against sanctioned art and commercial spaces. The aura makes these shoes into seemingly authentically “powerful vehicles for change.”

The above example also supports Cottrill’s claims about individuality as a source of much wider impact. The “rebellion” in these designs created for the fight against AIDS is a simultaneous and strategic deployment of the individual and the collective, seemingly not in contradiction. The sneakers are “one of a kind” and they are also part of an “African canvas collection” from Converse. You can rebel—by customizing your own shoes—and be part of a “powerful vehicle for change” at the same time. This latter message implies activism, which is a collective response with a higher purpose. That the shoes contain materials from, and designs apparently inspired by, Africa speaks to both individuality and the communitarian ethical ideal of collective effort to solve the AIDS crisis. This dual approach to social change is part of its aura, its perceived authenticity

and transcendence. Converse is working both sides of the equation. It invites consumers to take the be part of change as it offers a catalogue of “rebellious” products that rationalize rebellion into a commoditized lifestyle.

Authors such as Klein (2000) have argued that this is the paradox of the corporate manufacture of uniqueness. It is marketed en masse and is therefore reproducible. Her analysis accords with Ritzer’s notion of enchantment as being reproduced continuously in the cathedrals of consumption. The cathedrals must appear to address us personally. In discourse analytic terms, Norman Fairclough labels this address to a mass audience in inclusive intimate language “synthetic personalization” (1989). It is “a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handled’ *en masse* as an individual” (p. 62). Fairclough argues that this form of address is so common as to be normative. From the ebullient restaurant greeter to advertising to the simulated conversation of chat shows on television, many of our interactions are a manufactured intimacy that creates a sense of personal address. In short, this form of address it is used to enchant.

One of the methods companies use to create synthetic personalization is through cultural branding, which is about creating a story that consumers identify with as a familiar narrative (Holt, 2004). Most iconic brands have been able to tap into such a story that strikes a chord with a segment of the population in a given moment, and some of the most successful have traded on counterculture and rebellion. Coke connected with the hippie culture in the 1970s with its “I’d like to teach the world to sing” campaign.

Volkswagen marketed its Beetle in the 1960s and 70s by poking fun at the suburban conformity that the big three Detroit automakers were selling. It marketed its

ugliness, its gas mileage and its resale value. The famous advertising firm DDB and its founder Bill Bernbach, encouraged the bohemian crowd to “Think Small” (p. 66-72) at a time when cars, houses and suburban lifestyles were getting bigger. The VW Beetle was the vehicle that did not mean virility, or female attraction, or the suburban family. It was utilitarian, and non-obsolescent; the Bug didn’t change. It was defined by what it was not. DDB and Volkswagen created a story about subversion, directed at consumers who wanted to think of themselves as transgressive. Today this is a common advertising strategy. “But long before Generation X every thought of subverting commercialism by pretending to be outside its influence, Bernbach was already there,” (Twitchell, 2000, p. 117).

RED and its partners also create a cultural narrative of transgression. In publicity surrounding the campaign they link the seemingly discordant tropes of individualism and communitarian action by branding Africa itself as a place of beauty and need. They use cultural narratives about the continent strategically, and they invite consumers to personally join in. As the Converse examples above suggest, RED and its partner companies trade heavily on all things “African,” music to stylized designs, to people. The campaign uses Africa purposefully, to animate or *enchant*, in order to place the project in an emotional register. This is not rebel without a cause. It is branded rebellion that is repurposed as social activism. Below I discuss the imagery and marketing of the continent that does this work, and link it back to my analysis in the previous chapter.

## Branding Africa, Branding Social Responsibility

RED's cultural branding narrative about AIDS and contemporary Africa is a story about wealthy countries' triumph over the African pandemic. I discussed the orientalist construction of African identity in Chapter 2. The campaign in fact directs its story toward consumers through the many images and videos of people with AIDS who have been brought back to health thanks to RED money. The website features "demand images" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) of mothers holding babies, groups of children smiling into the camera. Such images command attention and response from the viewer through eye contact. The site features several videos where patients who have received ARVs are transformed from grainy, gaunt deathbed images into full-colour pictures of health. They are part of the brand, working as an interface between consumer and producer. This cultural narrative, however, is primarily a story about consumers and how they see themselves as compassionate global citizens who can help purchase the health of Others far away.



Figure 3.4. Emporio Armani (RED) perfume



Figure 3.5. Dell (RED) Computer

RED partner companies specifically brand 'Africanness' by selling goods, many of which they adorn with generic African motifs. They feature stylized depictions of the continent or markings that connote them generically as "African." Items from Emporio Armani are "inspi(RED) by Africa" (Armani, n.d.). T-shirts, bracelets, computers and perfume dispensers sport colours and exterior packaging that quote a non-specific Africa. Armani decorates one perfume container with what appear to be stick figures of people (Figure 3.4). They are a quotation of a 'primitive' drawing on a cave or a rock, or perhaps 'traditional' African art. Dell adorns its Product (RED) computers with pictures of the African continent and colourful abstract drawings that connote non-specific "African-ness" (Figure 3.5). Converse has called its running shoe with African mudcloth designs "an instrument of global change." The continent itself is a logo, as in Figure 3.6.

The commodity, including a commoditized Africa, is the agent of history, just with McClintock's (1996) analysis of Victorian advertising in Chapter 2. Africa is a brand and a logo, enchanted by celebrity, by the smiling faces of anonymous RED treatment success stories, by music that *sounds* African, as in the Pappalardo skater video. All of these productions of the continent brand and market it as an exotic locale for the pleasure of consumers. We can consume the Other, to return to bell hooks, under the comfort of progressive liberal politics. Race is ever present in the 'African' stylization of products and in the human stories via a powerful semioticized fusion of image and sound.

The creation of *Brand Africa* belies the fact that the campaign, at this writing, is active in only six of 54 African countries—Rwanda, Ghana, Swaziland, Lesotho, South Africa and Zambia. Yet the consumer in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and other wealthy countries can purchase a little bit of the brand name, Africa, through the

campaign and its many products. Through the personalized address, the cause, the ‘African’ designs, RED hails consumers to become a little bit African. All of this is in line with the “brands, not products” mantra of contemporary advertising and marketing.

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Figure 3.6. (RED) Africa Logo

The people, Silvia, Nigel, Elimas and others, are not part of the cultural branding model in an aspirational sense. RED obviously does not portray such actors as part of the construction of lifestyle for the affluent consumer, except in Said’s sense suggested in Chapter 2 where the Other does the work of constructing identity in opposition with the privileged (2003/1978). They are “before-and-after” examples but not in the sense

that we might place ourselves in their shoes as in the case of advertising for weight loss or beauty products. Rather, they are proof of the validity of the larger cultural authority of RED and Bono, and also of the consumer. They are among the instruments of enchantment that enable the campaign to create a compelling ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ story that is marketable.

As an aspect of their cultural narratives about Africa, the partner companies highlight the fact that they do business there. They tell us that artists from Africa and “around the world” create many of the products, though we do not learn who those people are. The website references “product” sourced in Africa, but the people who do the work to produce the materials for the commodities are invisible. Starbucks states that Africa is an important source of its coffee (Starbucks, 2009). This statement is prominent on the Gap’s page: “Gap (PRODUCT) RED made its debut in the UK in Spring 2006 with the iconic “INSPI(RED)” Gap t-shirt which was made in Africa from 100% African cotton. We have remained committed to making a difference in Africa, sourcing product there for over a decade and continuing to give back to communities that we do business with there (Gap, 2009).”<sup>8</sup> Converse’s mudcloth designs are also said to be from Africa. And some Gap t-shirts have been made at a factory in Lesotho (Mathiason, 2007), one of the poorest places on the continent. But neither Gap nor Starbucks, which claims to “source” coffee in Africa, nor any of the other companies shows the people who do the work of creating this ‘African’ brand.

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<sup>8</sup> Earlier iterations of company pages did have scenes of workers making RED t-shirts etc. See Perry, 2008, Gap page retrieved 23 May, 2009 [http://www.joinred.com/Shop/shop\\_gap.aspx](http://www.joinred.com/Shop/shop_gap.aspx).

We are meant to see the corporate responsibility manifest in the “sourced” raw materials and in the look and style of the finished products. Africa is, in this characterization, a vast untapped resource that is being operated at less than full output because of the AIDS pandemic. It becomes a factory as well as a lifestyle choice and a brand. The free-floating RED brand subsumes Africa. The campaign’s heavy use of the continent as a logo and the companies’ use of African motifs on their products is an aspect of how RED enchants the entire continent as a cathedral of consumption. It is rationalized, reproduced, and aestheticized unapologetically in the name of a good cause. Bono and other celebrities, as the previous chapter suggests, are agents who animate or *enchant* these carefully constructed and contradictory narratives, of rebellion and conformity, of individuality and communality, of desire and virtue. They are in fact producing a branded enchantment that claims a kind of positive ethical comportment that RED (and Bennett) strives to capture.

### **Conclusion**

Product RED produces a cathedral of consumption, a theme park that it enchants for the pleasure of its audience. The campaign brands all things ‘African’ in order to enchant and to persuade consumers to buy for the cause. But consumers also purchase aspects of their identity within the enchanted cathedral of Africa. They can be acquisitive and giving, individualistic and communitarian, desirous and virtuous. RED, as a cause, a cathedral and a source of consumer identity does not exist without the branded cultural authority of Bono and other celebrities. His expertise, fashioned both through the rational persuasion of expert voice and an emotional appeal, is the heart of

the campaign. His fame-fuelled authority legitimates the appropriation and branding of Africa, makes it not only normative but spiritual.

I took up Bennett in this chapter because she provides a theoretical account for the discursive constructions of the RED campaign and for what we might consider the common sense view of celebrity philanthropy. She brackets, and RED negates, the fact that consumer life is a transaction that plays on the home audience's profound desires—for material goods and for belonging. She essentially suggests a feel-good ethical comportment that has no politics. This is also what RED, and other celebritized social causes, tend to do. This apolitical enchantment does not take into account the work that corporations, including those engaged in “commodity activism,” do in consciously and strategically constructing identity.

RED, as much as any iconic commercial name, is about the power of the brand, which in this case claims to be selling activism. The brand, as Nike's Phil Knight implied, exists to market an affective resonance that will fuel desire (and therefore sales). Desire is bound up with its ideological mainstay, individualism, a discourse so ubiquitous as to seem organic. RED links individualism to social change by defining desire as virtuous, and by exoticizing Africa as a theme park under the popular trope of one-world communality. The campaign, like in Bennett's analysis, posits such an intervention as the outcome of personal action that might flow from a sense of wonder in the commodity form. For RED, an intangible magical feeling and identification is the key to consumption that services one's lifestyle aspirations but at the same time gives desire a higher social purpose.

But this enchantment, aside from its individual approach to structural questions around consumer capitalism, *is* exoticization. To enchant the RED project through branding is to appropriate, and therefore to erase. For while the RED campaign is persuasive as an appeal to the affluent consumer, it equally fortifies relations of dominance and appropriation. It does so via a marketplace exchange relationship. The enchantment for a good cause comes at a price of branding all things “African,” into a cultural narrative that is, in the final analysis, about the self-image of the travellers, be they celebrities or their fans purchasing a piece of the continent.

I do not suggest that Product RED appeals to consumer in an entirely cynical manner. We cannot know the intent behind the campaign publicity beyond the assumption that it supports the idea of cause marketing. RED does, however, demonstrate some of the pitfalls of industry celebrity activism as a kind of branding. As analysis in the last two chapters suggests, one of the major outcomes of such projects is that they enhance the cultural authority of famous people, including journalists who publicize these celebrity doings. Together they stand in for political engagement and they do work in constructing identity both at home and abroad.

Next I begin a discussion about the ways in which newer notions of celebrity can operate in celebritized campaigns online. Online/social media provide a platform for previously undeveloped iterations of celebrity, and nascent forms of activism and philanthropy. As I argued in Chapter 1, *everyday celebrity* is not unrelated to the modalities of culture industry celebrity I examine in this dissertation. The kind of celebrity that might emerge from outside the powerful halls of the culture industries never the less overlaps with it. But celebrity, as a form of cultural authority, is shifting in

the context of digital media. The *It Gets Better* campaign that journalist and activist Dan Savage launched in 2010 makes for a revealing study of celebrity authority, social action and speaking back. While the campaign does not have the African connection that is de rigueur among institutional celebrities, it presents an opportunity to examine the potential of a more bottom-up, less bounded version of fame. *It Gets Better* has some unique characteristics that I argue open up the potential to subvert, or at least work alongside, the cultural authority of the sanctioned celebrity of entertainment and politics.

## Chapter 4

### “It Gets Better:” Digital Celebrity and Collective Cultural Authority



Fig. 4.1. Savage & Miller: It gets Better

The *It Gets Better* video project is the brainchild of Seattle journalist Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller. They launched it in 2010 after a spate of suicides among gay teenagers in the United States, including the high-profile case of Tyler Clementi. The Rutgers University student jumped from New York’s George Washington Bridge after his roommate recorded and shared video of his sexual encounters with another man in their dorm. Savage was also moved by the suicide of a teen named Billy Lucas who had never identified as gay but was the object of homophobic bullying (Kelly, 2010). Savage said it was a visceral response. He said in the original video that he and Miller uploaded to YouTube (Savage & Miller, 2010) that he wished he could talk to these young men for

just a few minutes and tell them that their lives and sense of self would improve as they grow up and gain independence.

Their video went viral; Savage expected to get a few hundred responses at most (Weir, 2011; Savage, 2012). He and Miller originally imagined that “average, everyday gays and lesbians” would share their stories, but soon celebrities began to participate (Kelly, 2010). More people uploaded their stories to the YouTube site and the project reached YouTube’s 650-video limit in less than two weeks. As of early 2012, more than 40,000 people had contributed videos (It Gets Better, 2012). Most are embedded in the project website and are also linked via a YouTube channel.

*It Gets Better* enables people from diverse perspectives to produce their own celebritized self, and in doing so it facilitates a form cultural authority. I use the campaign to explore the evolving nature of celebrity, and the production of expert knowledge, in the context of online media and in relationship to news and other popular genres. I look at the ways in which online media enable identity production and how the flattening out of expertise plays out in a celebritized site of social action—an organized response to LGBT bullying.<sup>9</sup> What opportunities exist in this project for mobilizing oppositional discourses? How do people produce celebrity as part of their identity?

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<sup>9</sup> In this chapter I use the terms *queer*, *LGBT* and *LGBTQ* interchangeably to describe the people and communities that the *It Gets Better* project is created to address. While I am aware of the identity politics around these terms, and I tend to use the label *queer* as a personal descriptor, I use all of these terms because people who identify lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/genderqueer have claimed all of these categories as an affirmation. Here I have generally adopted the labels that respective people or organizations being cited have used.

This chapter is an initial analysis of the campaign and its production of celebrity and cultural authority. The videos are a venue for performances of different kinds of ‘everyday celebrity.’ Some of the contributors have institutional cultural authority that propels the reach of their message; others do not. But together the videos produce a kind of collective, *viral celebrity*. At the same time, the *It Gets Better* project provides a forum for self-production. People speak *for* themselves, and in some cases critique the institutional celebrity’s presumption to speak to young queer youth who are struggling. As such, *It Gets Better* also demonstrates the agency that ‘ordinary’ people claim to represent themselves, in a localized venue. It does not displace the power to which people speak back, nor advocate for structural change. However the *It Gets Better* case, juxtaposed with the others in this study, illustrates the power that lies in being able to represent oneself.

I argue that this campaign enables a mode of celebritized authority that is flatter and more dispersed. It provides a venue for more open critique, both of the issues it raises and of the *It Gets Better* approach to them. The campaign lacks an activist sensibility; its very title is in the passive voice. Its theme—that somehow circumstances will change of their own accord—does not explicitly advocate for structural change to combat violence and intimidation. As such it reinscribes neoliberal ideologies such as meritocracy and individualism. However it has a populist momentum that the other celebrity-driven campaigns do not. It grows and flourishes, for example, on Facebook and in the Twitter hashtag #itgetsbetter. It is open ended and structured for critique from within and without. It contains videos that speak back to some of the assumptions of the project as Savage originally conceived it.

Furthermore, *It Gets Better* is a hub around which the media circle when it comes to issues of sexual identity and rights. Writers across the blogosphere have both criticized and celebrated it. Mainstream media cover the project and the issues it raises, but unlike the other campaigns they do not dwell exclusively on the individual celebrity of Dan Savage. The project, the video contributions and the people who produced them have a life of their own. The project does enhance Savage's celebrity and authority to be sure. But the contributions offer a number of models for identity and they collectively produce a form of dispersed expertise, and therefore authority. Savage himself has called the project a "movement" (2012). While I do not take up the project as a social movement per se, I do suggest that it produces a collective authority that is greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Everyday Celebrity and Digital Culture**

As with culture industry iterations of celebrity, that which emanates from digital life is bound up with the vocational crossings from Chapter 1. Digital life—social media, blogs, websites and even email—are means by which people generate *well-knownness* and by which their fame migrates to other cultural, social and media sites. These crossings are particularly visible in *It Gets Better*, where traditional print and electronic news media source their stories directly out of the campaign, quoting not only Savage and his partner, but also people who upload videos. Certainly most of the people who have gained renown in the context of the project are not culture-industry celebrities. But they exemplify the ways in which fame, as the transitory and sometimes localized condition that Giles (1999) describes, circulates in the media.

With digital life comes something of a cultural turn in celebrity as a discourse of the self. Individuals can easily share aspects of their private lives, put themselves on display, make up new personae, identify with others, advocate, summon and join new publics. We all consume and are consumed. Everyone with access to a computer (I acknowledge that this excludes large numbers of people who lack material means) can assume a kind of celebrity, and in some cases that performance, or the audience for it, multiplies online. This kind of celebrity becomes a process as much as a state of being (Marwick, 2010, pp. 13-14); it is something one *does* as much as something one *is*.

While some online presentations of self clearly lean toward the blatantly promotional and narcissistic, others are more complex. In a sense all presentations of self are promotional (cf. Goffman, 1959). But online culture is very much connected to production, to a self-conscious impulse to produce the self. New media intensify the blending of production and consumption (Marshall, 2004, pp. 10-11). They are also a site where causes—progressive and regressive, inclusive and exclusive—can compete for the hearts and minds of the public or, more accurately, the diverse and divergent publics of contemporary media culture.

Alice Marwick (2010) identifies three online self-presentation techniques that are useful to this research: lifestreaming, micro-celebrity and self-branding. *Micro-celebrity* is the strategic sharing of personal information online to create a sense of closeness. It is a performance of intimacy and friendship. People assume an audience as they share aspects of themselves. One constructs one's social media contacts as a fan base (p. 230). Sharing, via Facebook and Twitter status updates, for example, implies a circle of close friends, fans or followers. Culture industry celebrities and non-celebrities

alike mete out details of their lives online, and industry-celebrities who do so create a certain perceived authenticity (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

While micro-celebrity is the concept most relevant to this chapter, the other two are interrelated. The second presentation technique, *lifestreaming* is the related practice of sharing personal information, generally about the banalities of life such as foods eaten, books read, daily life maintenance and so on. People track and share their personal movements through the day, creating a kind of public personal mini-diary (p. 16). Finally, *personal branding*, related to the other two, is the strategic creation of identity as a deliberate marketing strategy. It is a business-friendly maintenance of an “edited self” more directly related to one’s work-life image (p. 15). And Marwick argues that self-branding is a manifestation of the culture of Web 2.0, which encourages a neo-liberal view of the self (p. 299). It is inherently an advertising technique that positions the self as product and one of its primary tenets is that one must promote some personal expertise in order to rise above the pack (Harold, 2012 in press).

Theresa Senft (2008) first coined the term micro-celebrity in her ethnographic study of the camgirl phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s. She describes it a “style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs and social networking sites to ‘amp up’ their popularity among readers, viewers and those to whom they are linked online” (p. 25). This definition clearly suggests not only celebrification of self in online culture, but also a deliberate effort to build social, if not always economic, capital. Online micro-celebrity is not as immediately lucrative as industry celebrity, she suggests, but viewers and readers are highly engaged in the doings and motives of the online performer.

Marwick argues that all three modes—micro-celebrity, livestreaming and personal branding—commodify identity; they are “a strategic way to display and garner status,” and such status can translate into material rewards (p. 10). These uses of social media, she suggests, foster individualism. They reward a focus on the self and they promote an individual competitiveness that serves the current neo-liberal moment’s assumptions about meritocracy. That narrative serves as a justification for the decline of the welfare state and dismantling of other social policies. Marwick’s work is a reminder that there always is an element of self-promotion and branding inherent in the production capabilities of Web 2.0, and that includes the *It Gets Better* project.

Both Marwick and Senft argue that online celebrity use industry popular culture and celebrity performance as a kind of “raw material” for doing celebrity online (Marwick, 2010, p. 86). “Micro-celebrity practitioners imitate music videos, paparazzi photographs, self-help books and celebrity interviews in their creative products” (p. 230-31). They emulate these genres as status-seeking techniques, she argues, in a culture that values such production from industry celebrities. The practice of micro-celebrity therefore exemplifies what she calls “aspirational production” (p. 220). It is not culture-industry celebrity, but it has many of the same hallmarks and it is the primary process of image creation and management for people whose fame (however large or small) issues from online media.

The performance of self is not new. Erving Goffman (1959) argued that there has always been an element of performance in the ways that individuals and groups present themselves to the world. People carefully stage their identities for presentation to social circles and beyond, and the performance of self can vary significantly by audience and

context. Most everyone presents differently for family, close friends, colleagues, acquaintances, strangers and so on. In more formal settings we tend to perform “front stage” personas, the more carefully managed and scripted selves, taking pains to guard aspects of ourselves in particular social contexts, as Goffman found. We save our more familiar selves for the “back stage” with close family and friends. In other words, there has always been theatricality to the ways in which we apprehend and perform our identities.

Hall and du Gay’s “circuit of culture” (Hall, 1997) analytic points out the interconnectedness of production, consumption, representation and identity, and the inherent link of these “moments” of social life with the broader structures that regulate them. All social life is, of course, mediated (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Couldry 2008). But in the current moment we have an even more heavily mediatized modeling of self-performance that is imbued with celebrity in the senses of it that I defined in Chapter 1. I do not want to suggest that the fact of new media is in itself revolutionary moment in terms of identity and self-presentation. As Thurlow (2012 in press) points out, the revolutionary rhetoric of Web 2.0 is steeped in a cultural investment in the newness of things and in the impulse to monetize that investment. The narrative of new media as social transformation or democratizing is a totalizing neoliberal move that masks the important hegemonic contestations that people wage online (Marwick, 2010; Thurlow, 2012 in press). However the production possibilities and interactive affordances of online media do enable productions of self that, I argue, can generate a collectivized cultural authority that is relevant to this research.

Celebrity plays a vital role in modeling self-presentation as many of the media-celebrity scholars cited throughout this study argue. Online environments enhance the conditions of self-production for celebrities, but also for the rest of us. Marshall (2010) argues that celebrity, as a discourse of the self, is integral to today's "presentational" media culture. Celebrities have always done "pedagogic work" that teaches "generations to engage and use consumer culture to 'make' oneself" (p. 36). In other words, celebrity provides a model for consumer, democratic and social life. But digital culture, at least in this case, flattens out what counts as celebrity, and also the cultural authority that emanates from it. Online media production of self is neither wholly intimate nor entirely a "front stage" media performance. It is both. Marshall calls this intermingling of interpersonal and highly mediatized presentations "intercommunication." In social media we engage in "a multi-layered form of communication that kneads mediated forms with conversation" (p. 42). We are both performing to an audience and having an intimate conversation with friends.

New media enable a further blurring of the distinction between production and consumption, between public and private, and between "online" and "offline" life (Marwick, 2010, p. 7). People can engage in interpersonal, even intimate, relationships in ways that may not involve face-to-face interactions. Social media users know that they are publicizing one-on-one interactions, say, with "friends" on Facebook. Personal status updates and postings on social media platforms are public, at least to some extent depending on platform and privacy settings. Whether banal, touching, humorous or overtly political, online users offer up a version of themselves that has an element of celebrity to it. This representational self is not separate from the presentations that exist

in other media forms. The two work together in producing shifting iterations of celebrity, and of self.

Celebrity's long association with one-to-many platforms such as film, television and radio is not diminished in this scenario. "It is more accurate to say that that influence is just less profound and less omnipresent and perhaps more remediated through on-line pathways," Marshall argues (2010, p. 38). So-called 'ordinary' people have always become famous, sometimes "suddenly extracted from their everyday lives and processed for stardom," (Turner, 2010, p. 12). Now more traditional one-to-many media platforms work in conjunction with what Marshall calls "presentational" media, in the production of identity. That identity production is bound up in Euro-North American life with a flatter celebritized notion of self. This production of celebrity is not exactly the "hero" or "star" that Monaco (1978) and others describe because it does not necessarily require traditional culture-industry publicity. People fashion their celebrity identities, as Marwick (2010) suggests, by streaming and branding themselves online. These celebritized performances sometimes, but not always, migrate to traditional media. At times they can form a chorus of voices that amounts to a flatter celebritized cultural authority, as I demonstrate below.

One of the debates in this area, as with scholarship on digital media generally, is the extent to which the opening of production to "ordinary" people is an agentful moment and the extent to which it is bound to be reappropriated for commercial purposes. Certainly the convergence of media cultures means that online production feeds a new presentational culture in traditional electronic media. For example the music and television industries, including reality and lifestyle television, tap into online

forms of celebrity and vice versa. At times they produce each other and generate vocational crossings between 'real' life and entertainment, between the 'ordinary' and the 'expert.' Justin Bieber was a YouTube phenomenon before he was a teen pop star; conservative commentator Glenn Beck is no longer on cable television but he lives on in various online formats as well as on talk radio. Online and offline media feed and sustain each other, and generate both celebrity and economic value.

Celebrity media scholar Graeme Turner (2010) argues that all media participation, including the production of self, is ultimately governed by the economic strategies of the large corporate media. They mine "the rich seam of 'the ordinary'" for such genres as reality television; online media are part of the excavation and production of everyday life. Corporate media even police the 'ordinary,' as Turner points out. For example they disqualify reality contestants who are already working in the media industries (p. 12). Participants on reality TV venues must perform 'ordinariness' satisfactorily for the show. This kind of fame is manufactured, almost factory style, Turner argues, and it can get used up just as quickly. People can live off, and rearticulate, their fame online, as with Marwick's (2010) lifestreaming. They create a digital portrait of everyday actions and thoughts through a stream of routine status updates that demonstrate the ordinary (p. 363-64). They can enter, or move back and forth between, the gilded gates of culture-industry via social media. Either way, Turner ascribes a fundamental logic of corporate economics to media participation; he identifies a difference between who gets to speak and who gets to be heard in contemporary online culture (p. 128).

Turner specifically argues (2010) that converged media life brings not so much a democratic turn, as a “demotic” turn. That is, the ordinary quotidian stuff of life draws in the media and everyone who produces media content. This is how he accounts for the surge of all types of reality television and online productions of self. The performance of the everyday certainly produces a lot of media content; people can move in and out of fame in short order. But those characteristics of contemporary media life do not necessarily constitute an opening of the channels of publicity, nor a remaking of public life.

Yet convergence media culture has its own unique affordances. Because it is not just a one-to-many venue, it confounds the distinction between producer and audience. It is both top-down and bottom-up, as Henry Jenkins (2006) argues. Corporate convergence exists alongside what he calls grassroots convergence. As media companies learn new ways to broaden their reach and expand revenue through multiple media channels, so do consumers.

Convergence doesn't just involve commercially produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits.... It also occurs when people take media into their own hands. Entertainment content isn't the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels (Jenkins, 2006, p. 17).

Jenkins' work suggests a turn in the current media environment, one that creates space for the possibility of speaking back, and for altering the agenda-setting power of mainstream media that otherwise amplify privileged celebrity voices. New media circuits are certainly well regulated. But they enable a genuine production of the ordinary, Jenkins suggests, that is not entirely regulated or sanctioned by the culture

industries. I argue, with Jenkins, that the production of the ordinary is celebritized to be sure. And it produces a mass of neoliberal discourses that commodify the everyday. But that does not mean big media wholly commodify and subsume every aspect of everyday life.

My purpose is not to revisit longstanding debates about whether the interactive affordances of digital media are inherently democratizing or a recolonizing, activist or banal (for a cogent summary and analysis see Turner, 2010, Chapter 5). Surely new media constitute a platform for both democratization and recolonization. Technology is neither inherently 'good' nor 'bad' as James Carey (1989), among many others, point out. Rather, I am looking at the ways in which new media in this case help produce identities and forms of cultural authority. The *It Gets Better* project is a space for activist meaning making and speaking back within digital consumer life. I move away from the at-times deterministic debate that assumes media technologies have inherent qualities, that they are, in fact, agents in public life (see Thurlow, 2012 on this). Rather I look at the ways in which people may use this particular online venue to speak—for themselves and for others. I am principally interested in the ways this may or may not shift the meanings and practices of celebrity and cultural authority.

### ***It Gets Better: Viral Celebrity And Cultural Authority***

Dan Savage is possibly best known for his syndicated sex advice column *Savage Love*, which he began writing in the city's alternative weekly paper *The Stranger* at its inception in 1991. He was the newspaper's editor-in-chief from 2001 to 2007 at which time he became director. His syndicated column appears in alternative papers across

North America. Savage has parlayed sex and sexuality into a high-profile career that includes the *Savage Lovecast* podcast since 2006 and more recently a Savage Love application for Android phones. His celebrity has exploded in the years since he launched the *It Gets Better* project. He was a guest judge on RuPaul's *Drag Race* in 2012 and in April he began a reality-television-style series on MTV called *Savage U*. In the 30-minute MTV program he and a producer visit U.S. university campuses to meet with students individually and talk to groups of undergraduates to dispense sex advice.

In the original eight-and-a-half-minute *It Gets Better* video, Savage and Miller (2010) talk about their experiences in high school as boys in Chicago and Spokane, WA, respectively. Both presented as “obviously gay,” as Savage describes it, by virtue of their interests, gestures, ways of speaking and acting. They tell the viewer that their lives in middle age are rich and full and that it was all worth the pain of high school ostracism. They tell their stories of coming out to their parents. At first Savage's mother said she never wanted to meet his boyfriends and that he was never to bring a man around to the house. “And my mother recently passed away and she told me to let Terry know that she loved him like a daughter,” Savage says. Theirs is a story of overcoming adversity, of not just surviving, but thriving.

The two men tell of meeting in a bar and falling in love and of adopting their son, DJ, who appears with them in a still photo edited into the video. Savage shares a touching story of walking the streets of Paris with DJ when he was wide-awake from jetlag. The two got croissants from a bakery before dawn and watched the sun come up near the Eiffel Tower. Moments like that are worth the hardships of growing up he says. “If you choose to end your life, then the bullies really won, and you've deprived yourself

of so much potential happiness.” Adds Miller: “Living well is the best revenge.” Their central message became the primary theme of the project; it is a plea for young people to persevere through their pain and torment. “It gets better. However bad it is now, it gets better and it can get great” Savage says. “It can get awesome. Your life can be amazing but you have to tough this period out and you have to live your life, so that you’re around for it to get amazing. And it can and it will.”

Their message, and the responses of other contributors, prompted significant coverage in mainstream news, alternative media and the blogosphere. Since the original video, people from many walks of life have recorded and uploaded their stories. In video after video people assure young LGBTQ people that life will not always be as tough, that the teen years “suck.” Confident adults urge young people to find a safe person to talk to. Typical messages make similar claims: These are vulnerable years for adolescents, particularly for people who may be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Sometimes parents, teachers, and friends reject them. Some rejection takes the form of bullying and other forms of violence. Many videos end with contact information for The Trevor Project, a national suicide prevention program and help line in the U.S., and the Kid’s Help Line, a similar program in Canada. The project website also links to affiliated IGB sites in Latin America, Australia, Denmark and Sweden.

People of all ages, many of whom identify as LGBT, share concrete examples of how life got better for them. Many early videos were individual responses from middle-aged adults whose message followed a similar narrative as the one that Savage and Miller created. Younger participants began sharing stories about surviving high school and finding acceptance in university life. Straight allies began uploading videos, a fact

that caused some consternation in the queer community growing around *It Gets Better* that the site was being co-opted, but which Savage welcomed as part of the inclusive nature of the project (Bennett, 2011).

In the first months of the campaign entertainment celebrities and well-known politicians contributed videos. Among them were Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, Chris Colfer and Jane Lynch of the Fox series *Glee*, pop stars Justin Bieber, Nicki Minaj and Ke\$ha. Celebrity videos remain very popular viewing. Organizations and companies added their contributions. Other high schoolers told stories of how life got easier when they finally shared their story with a friend. Some contributors have a cultural authority that flows from their media industry celebrity, including from governmental politics. Others' authority derives from their self-identification as LGBTQ people. Some are both celebrity and gay, as with *Glee's* Chris Colfer and Jane Lynch. In 2011 big professional sports franchises, notorious for homophobia, began uploading videos, starting with the San Francisco Giants on June 1 of that year.

Based on my own reading of the site, I categorize the videos as follows:

- Unaffiliated individuals who record their messages alone or with friends.  
These are of varying lengths and of mixed audio and video quality. Many appear to be recorded in a living room or bedroom;
- Unaffiliated parents and straight allies of LGBT youth;
- Employees of corporate entities, for example Facebook, Staples, Microsoft, Eli Lilly, Bayer, CBS;

- Institutions such as universities, for example Emory University president Jim Wagner, UCLA, CalState Fullerton, North Carolina State's GLBT Center, and Ohio State, which facilitated the making of videos for anyone on campus;
- Non-profit organizations and support groups, for example the Feather Boa Dads, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, National Gay Pilots Association.
- Celebrities and media personalities and politicians, for example Ellen Degeneres, Suze Orman, Margaret Cho, Kim Kardashian, Janet Jackson, Ke\$ha and Sarah Silverman;
- Political figures, for example Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, New York city mayor Michael Bloomberg, Fort Worth, Texas, councilman Joel Burns, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, former Canadian Opposition Leader Jack Layton;
- Sports franchises, for example the San Francisco Giants, Boston Red Sox, Chicago Cubs, Seattle Mariners, Storm and Seahawks.

There is no "typical" video, although many follow the Savage-Miller model. Most are direct addresses to the viewer. The personal narratives usually describe the pain, and in some cases violence, of growing up queer, followed by a kind of 'key-change' to a happier, more-fulfilled present. Many contributors end their personal stories and offer assurances about the future. Their testimonials include a solemn plea for troubled youth to seek help rather than taking their lives. Some contributors provide an email and invite young people into a personal correspondence if they feel isolated because of their sexuality.

Some of the celebrity videos came in response to the suicides that autumn of 2010. Both President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton uploaded videos in mid-October that expressed their sadness and urged young LGBT people to reach out. “We’ve got to dispel this myth that bullying is just a normal rite of passage,” Obama (2010) said. “I don’t know what it’s like to be picked on for being gay, but I do know what it’s like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don’t belong. It’s tough.” In her video, Clinton (2010) reminds viewers that many LGBT people serve openly at the State Department and that the battle for equality is ongoing in the United States. “Your country needs you,” she says.

A number of the entertainment celebrity videos are short public service announcements, as with Janet Jackson (2010) and Chris Colfer (2010). They are straight-ahead teleprompter advertisement-style promotions for the Trevor Project. Both express understanding about being treated as different, but the messages are more formal than the Savage-Miller model. A number of queer celebrities made more personal contributions. Jane Lynch of *Glee* recorded a video where she and her partner, Lara Embry, discuss their own experience of feeling that something was very wrong (Lynch & Embry, 2010). Theirs is an informal more amateur-style production in which they talk of their first unsettling feelings that they were gay. “I realized I was gay when I was about 12,” Lynch says, “and I thought it was a disease and I had it.” She says that she started to find acceptance when she began working in theatre, which is “teeming with gay people. And I started to see that being gay is just another way of loving.” She acknowledges that “sometimes telling your family is not great advice,” but urges the

viewer to “hang in there.” After high school “you get to choose a lot of things and make your life better,” Embry states.

Lynch’s personal celebrity message has obvious power. She is both Hollywood celebrity and queer. She asserts the authority of her culture industry celebrity that other entertainers deploy in previous chapters. She also models queer identity. From a news media perspective she is celebrity, eyewitness and expert source. She has credentials and experience. Hers is a powerful, personal and institutional authority to speak in the context of this project. She represents the kind of success and “becoming” that Savage and Miller promise is available to troubled queer youth. She and Embry are exemplars of the original IGB message. She is a success story, a celebrity, using this new-media format to engage viewers in a different way.

Lynch is her private self here, a version of it. Yet she maintains the *aura* of distance and uniqueness, as Benjamin (2006) called it. She is both an everyday person and a culture industry brand and she performs as both in this context. Lynch deploys her celebrity in similar ways as the other famous people such as Bono, Madonna and Angelina Jolie in previous cases. She uses her brand for the cause and this video no doubt adds value to Brand Lynch. However even here her role is different. Lynch speaks from her own experience as a queer woman. She does not purport to represent anyone else. And she is not the bright light around which the campaign, and therefore the media publicity, revolves. She is one of dozens of celebrity contributions and part of a subset of queer celebrities. Her contribution is not even among the few most viewed.

Lynch also telegraphs a kind of American Dream ideology that pervades the project. On the one hand she is modeling the endurance and ‘becoming’ that the

project's creators hope will reach troubled youth in their times of desperation. On the other she is advancing the consumer culture mythology that everyone can be exceptional, famous, and well to do. Her message has an authenticity that grows out of her speaking for herself, about her own experience as a queer woman. Yet she is part of the "demotic" (Turner, 2010) media culture narrative that everyone is unique and destined for greatness. From a larger cultural perspective, Lynch's video is a "bootstraps" moment that fits squarely within that dominant perspective of the campaign.

Still, the power of the IGB project does not issue solely, or perhaps even primarily, from big-name politicians or entertainers. Some of the contributors, like Lynch, have more institutional authority or expertise I examined in earlier chapters, at least the media-generated sanctioning of their views. Others do not. The videos by lesser-known or unknown contributors are the heart of the campaign. The examples below all cross between new and traditional media to some extent, a fact that enhances their cultural authority. But they all have experienced a kind of online celebrity in direct relationship to the campaign and its media publicity. They form part of the collective authority of the project that is central to my arguments about viral celebrity and expertise.

### **Viral Celebrity And Media Coverage**

The most-watched video in the project is by Randy Phillips, a 21-year-old U.S. airman who came out to his father after the federal government repealed the Don't Ask Don't Tell law in September 2011. The reality-TV-style video received more than 5.7 million YouTube views as of April 2012. Phillips performs his coming out live by phone from his military deployment in Germany, just hours after the U.S. government lifted its

ban on gays and lesbians serving openly (Phillips, 2011a). With the phone's speaker turned on, the viewer can hear both sides of the conversation. The tension is palpable as the phone rings several times and Phillips whispers: "My heart is beating like crazy." Then his father answers and the two exchange some pleasantries as Phillips fidgets. Finally he says: "Can I tell you something? Will you love me, period?" His father says "Yes."



**Fig. 4.2. *It Gets Better*: U.S. Airman Randy Phillips comes out – LIVE (2010)**

"Dad I'm gay," Phillips says. "Always have been.... I don't know when is the next time I'll be able to see you, and I didn't want do it the phone. I wanted to tell you in person, but I didn't want you to find out any other way." After a silence his father makes a nearly inaudible exclamation that sounds like "whoa." But the story ends well. Phillips's father repeats his support and love throughout the rest of the conversation:

“I still love you, ok? And I always will, no matter what, OK?”

“Yes sir”

“You are my son and I’m very proud of you, ok?”

“Yes sir”

“And I will always love you.”

Phillips’s story became part of the surge of media coverage about the repeal of the law that prohibited gay U.S. military personnel from living openly. His story appeared on mainstream media staples such as *Good Morning America* (ABC News, 2011), and on online news sites and blogs. Phillips became something of a media sensation with his decision to upload his coming out moment with his dad. He represents a form of celebrity that can issue from new media. The Phillips *It Gets Better* video, and thousands of others on the site, exemplifies the ways in which the campaign plays a role in setting news media coverage and the broader discourses around issues relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer-identified people. It is a celebritized presentation of the self that the project enables.

There is an element of personal branding in Phillips’s video and his other online productions. He leveraged the publicity to create his own micro-celebrity, as Marwick calls it. He produces regular videos on his YouTube channel in the wake of his viral coming out moment. His YouTube channel includes short workout videos (cf. Phillips 2012d), tips for eating well on a tight budget (2012c) and a demonstration of how to tie a Windsor necktie knot (2012b). His case demonstrates the interrelationship between digital and culture industry celebrity. While his fame does not begin in the culture industries, it is a commodified self-production that is bound up with big media and the aspirations of fame that the corporate media engender by producing the ‘ordinary’. Phillips’s productions are reality-TV style performances of everyday life. He also

produced a live video of the call to his mother, which did not go as well and which he did not upload to *It Gets Better* (Phillips, 2011b). It a long, somewhat tortured encounter in which his mother is often silent and in which she worries about his hell-bound soul. She ultimately assures him that she loves him. In all of his videos, Phillips is modeling a kind of reality or lifestyle television iteration of self. In other words, he is emulating a type of celebrity that is circumscribed by big media.

Yet Phillips's contributions to *It Gets Better* demonstrate the appeal for mainstream news and alternative/online sources alike in many of the project's videos. The IGB site was fodder for news accounts particularly in the eight to ten months after its 2010 launch. Traditional news sources leaned heavily toward the uncritical and promotional, as with coverage of the celebrity campaigns like Bono's Product RED and Matt Damon's Water.org. Journalists interviewed Savage, and news stories relayed anecdotal personal stories of LGBT people who have endured bullying. Some quoted from videos on the site or interviewed people in their communities. In terms of national coverage, a segment on NPR's *All Things Considered* is typical (Gross, 2011). It opened with audio from people who uploaded videos to the website and then segued into an interview with Savage, wherein he repeated much of the information in his own video and discussed gay issues generally. The media coverage publicized the already-viral online campaign.

Traditional print media (re)produced some critical coverage of the project. One of the main criticisms is that *It Gets Better* does not contain, or fundamentally invite, a structural critique of the problem of violence and intimidation of queer youth. Jude Tate, director of the University of Toronto's Sexual and Gender Diversity office, said the

project does not address the systemic homophobia and hate that is at the root of LGBTQ bullying. The argument here is that an online forum for personal stories does not in itself create a path to social change. "Who knows what the impact of a viral message will be on someone's level of hope. There isn't a lot of research out there," Tate told Canada's Post Media in a story that ran in newspapers across the country (Minsky, 2010, p. A28). Helen Kennedy of the national gay rights organization Egale Canada, argued that the message itself is passive; it suggests that somehow circumstances will change of their own accord. The campaign's central message should not be "it gets better" but "make it better" to encourage a proactive response to violence, she argued (Minsky, 2010).

Bloggers generated a robust critique in the early going. One (Femmephane, 2010) articulated many of the criticisms that circulated around the Web. She argued that the project, particularly the Savage-Miller video, promotes a classist urban elitist response to the problem of homophobia and bullying. Savage's tale of walking the streets of Paris eating croissants is beyond imagining for many young people in the rural heartland. Femmephane said he and Miller promote anti-rural and anti-religious sentiments that equate religion with homophobia. And the project underplays the fact that it may not be safe to come out in some places. "For a lot of folks, coming out doesn't only mean that your parents will promise to hate your lovers- it means violence, homelessness, abuse," she wrote.

Femmephane argued that the message that one must simply survive and wait for life to get better suggests that the onus is all on young queer people to endure oppression and violence. It does not truly challenge the acceptance by adults of bullying as a rite of passage. *It Gets Better* is not a message of change, she suggested. "It blames

the queer for not being strong enough to get to the rosy, privileged, fantasy.” Her articulate critique captures and advances much of the feedback that circulated at the time—that passivity and a secular gay male bias are embedded in the project.

These critiques capture the campaign very well, as it existed in the early going and as its ongoing dominant message. The project had a white gay male feel to it and an overarching passivity. Many of the early videos were like public service announcements where in celebrities in particular urged young people to call the Trevor Project if they felt desperate about their circumstances. They encouraged teens to find accepting adults to talk to, whether at home, at school or elsewhere. The project, and the videos within it, do not directly advocate for activism or structural change, although Savage does that personally in other aspects of his public life. *It Gets Better* projects an assimilationist gay life that suggests queer people are not different, but the same, and they want access to all the trappings of heterosexual consumer culture.

But the site has grown into a visible archive of queer life that has some breadth and depth. Some contributors challenge the original message; others display difference proudly and boldly. The project’s sheer size—more than 40,000 videos and more than 40 million views—gives it a critical mass of difference that is in itself noteworthy, and which I unpack further below (*It Gets Better*, 2012). It is a living document, one that has a dominant neoliberal message of universality and equality, but that also contains space for critiques and against-the-grain readings of queer life. The project’s visibility—its *virality*—gives those displays of difference legitimacy.

Savage implicitly addresses some of the main critiques in a book (Savage, 2011) and in a piece he wrote in *The Stranger* (Savage, 2012). He explains that the project gives

hope and “things are getting better before our very eyes” with changes in regressive laws and policies, and with increased visibility for LGBT people (in the U.S.). But “there are some things the project can’t do,” he acknowledges. It will not solve the problem of bullying on its own, nor create an activist agenda. That is a separate but related project:

Nothing about letting LGBT kids know that it gets better excuses or precludes us from pressing for the passage of the Student Non-Discrimination Act, demanding anti-bullying programs in all schools, confronting bigots who are making things worse for all kinds of kids, and supporting the work of the Trevor Project, GLSEN, and the American Civil Liberties Union LGBT Youth & Schools program (Savage, 2012).

Savage argues that it is important to “use the tools at our disposal” to get messages of hope to young people who are isolated because of their sexuality or because they are questioning their identity. The headline of the *Stranger* piece calls *It Gets Better* a YouTube movement and Savage’s argument here suggests that he sees it as one highly visible flank in a larger social activist cause.

Despite the criticisms, the campaign has prompted mainstream news coverage and helped frame discussion of homophobic bullying. It has influenced language use around LGBTQ issues. Newspapers, magazines and broadcasters not only covered the campaign as it went viral; they began to sprinkle mentions of it—and its mantra—into stories on related issues and events. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, gave prominent coverage to the city’s LGBT organization’s first public advertising campaign. The Attic Youth Center launched the campaign directly in response to *It Gets Better* when it bought space on public transit buses and subway cars (Thomas, 2011).

The words “it gets better” have appeared in news stories about queer issues and events, even when coverage was not about the campaign. The *Augusta Chronicle* led

coverage of its gay pride week that following year with a story about a man who came out to his Pentecostal family and was still hoping that “it gets better,” (McManus, 2011). The story did not mention the campaign, but used its language. A story in *The Atlantic* magazine about airman Phillips’s coming out credits Savage and *It Gets Better*. But it does not make Savage the focal point of the story, nor even quote him (Jackson, 2011). The *Chicago Daily Herald* covered a local filmmaker’s efforts to create a documentary about bullying at his alma mater high school (Ahern, 2011).

The news coverage has a different tone than that which surrounds the A-list celebrity campaigns of previous chapters. Some of that difference could be owing to the fact that Savage is not a typical culture-industry celebrity with the high wattage that acts as a beacon for news and entertainment reporters. But the campaign itself is also different. Contributors generate authority collectively. Celebrities are not the primary source of expertise in news accounts of either the campaign or of the issue of bullying. Savage is an initiator, a gatekeeper, and an important news source here. But he is not the single sanctioned ‘expert’ on growing up queer. That expertise is more diffuse.

Savage no doubt ultimately controls the content of the site. One can assume that people have attempted to upload virulently homophobic videos, for example, or that the project has deemed some contributions to be in bad taste. A viral IGB video in which actor and gay activist George Takei uses the word “douchebag,” for instance, is not on the official site, though Takei links to the Trevor Project (Takei, 2010). But Savage’s optimistic middle-class vision of gay life is not the only one on offer. The project has become a repository of contemporary LGBT representation, at least for the United States, Canada and some European and Latin American countries.

The media continue, at this writing, to use the project as a “news hook,” a basis for covering the issue of bullying. Newspapers and broadcasters produced special reports and features on the issues in the months after *It Gets Better* went live. Shortly after Savage and Miller launched the project, CNN’s Anderson Cooper (2010) did a special on his nightly AC 360 broadcast titled *Bullying: No Escape*. It covered not only gay bullying but also people who have been picked on because of their religion, body type or other categories and stereotypes. It included former bullies who talked about their actions and bullied students who talked about their feelings. Coverage was not restricted only to homophobic bullying; it included well-known people such Crystal Bowersox, a 2010 runner up on *American Idol*, who is straight but who recounted being bullied. It included credentialed experts as well as the celebrity television psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw (Cooper, 2010). Other media organizations produced similar discussions.

Journalists referred to *It Gets Better* in the coverage of cyber-bullying as well. In Arkansas, the vice-president of the Midland School District wrote a hateful rant on his Facebook page (Wing, 2010), which journalists and bloggers pounced on as an example of the kind of adult speech that sanctions violence and intimidation against queer youth. Clint McCance’s typo-laden rant was about a “wear purple day” that was a response to the series of bullying-related suicides in the fall of 2010. “Seriously, they want me to wear purple because five queers committed suicide. The only way im wearin it for them is if they all commit suicide. I cant believe the people of this world have gotten this stupid. We aer honoring the fact that they sinned and killed themselves because of their sin. REALLY PEOPLE.” In a later post he wrote: “It pisses me off, though, that we make

special purple fag day for them. I like that fags can't procreate. I also enjoy that they often give each other AIDS and die..." McCance wrote that he would disown his own children and "run them off" if they were gay.

McCance's social media postings exemplify the kind of behavior that people in the *It Gets Better* videos speak back against. He encapsulates the problem of intimidation and physical violence; traditional mainstream, online and alternative news media picked up on that. With the IGB project on prominent media display that autumn, they used the online campaign to amplify and contextualize their coverage. A number of people who spoke out against McCance cited the *It Gets Better* campaign as an activist voice against such speech (Cooper, 2010a). He announced his resignation from the school board within days, on CNN's Anderson Cooper 360. On that broadcast Cooper asked him bluntly: "Do you really hate gay people that much that you like to see them die" (Cooper, 2010b)? McCance apologized on the program, although many media activists, bloggers and commentators argued that he apologized more for his word choices and that people were hurt than for the animus behind the words (cf. Cooper, 2010c).

Social media were the primary venue for McCance's rant and for the forceful response that led to his resignation. Both McCance and his critics used online platforms to publicize themselves. Both sides asserted cultural authority through social media and *It Gets Better* was bound up in that debate. People mentioned it as a response to the McCance's Facebook posting, using its authority to ostracize a bully. Social media users' responses included barrage of Tweets at least 22 Facebook pages against him, with titles such as People United Against Clint McCance (n.d.), Clint McCance is a dick (n.d.), and Clint McCance: Closeted Homosexual? (n.d.).

As mentioned, actor and gay activist Takei's viral "It Gets Better" is not on the official project site. In it he states: "Mr. McCance, you are a douchbag. That's right, a douchebag" (Takei, 2010). After his blunt personal attack, Takei goes on to say he hopes that McCance does not kill himself when he finds himself in the headlines in the future, "this time caught with a rent boy from some South American country." Takei then pivots from a rant to a direct address to young viewers that is more like those on the IGB site. "It does get better, and there is help out there," he says, after which he provides the contact information for the Trevor Project. Here the actor creates a radical response to an incident of hate speech and places it in the context of the campaign. His video, though not on the IGB website, has received several million hits on YouTube.

As the controversy hit a crescendo McCance admitted he had received thousands of phone calls emails and "people threatening to kill my family and me" (Cooper, 2010b). He removed his family from the state and installed security in his home. "I'm reaping what I've sown," he told CNN's Cooper. "I've had a lot of hate speech thrown at me and my family on every level." Through viral amplification and critique of his remarks, and through mainstream news coverage of the hate speech, media production essentially toppled McCance the bully and disgraced McCance the public official. The *It Gets Better* project clearly played a role in the outcome.

The point here is that IGB is a focal point for producing cultural authority. While it is not an overtly activist cause, it does capture and generate a queer zeitgeist that has a certain momentum. Its authority is more diffuse, but it is nonetheless powerful. It helped generate the sanctioning of the bully, McCance, in a moment when individuals, corporate media and alternative media were calling out the problem. *It Gets Better*

played a role in putting the issue on the agenda and in the language of media discussion about issues of gay rights and discrimination. The project enables a form of viral cultural authority that mixes with industry celebrity via traditional and new media, and that mainstream news media take up.

Social scientists have worked to quantify a shift away from journalism studies' traditional notion that the news media act as gatekeepers of what counts and news and thus set a public agenda for the issues of the day (cf. Shaw & McCombs, 1977). As I discussed in Chapter 1, social media have altered the traditional news media's role, and this case exemplifies that change. Traditional and new media act as sources for each other as one content analysis of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* found (Messner & Watson DiStaso, 2009). As I mentioned, some scholars argue that the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the Bill Clinton presidency marked a watershed moment in this shift. There, new media were well ahead of traditional news sources (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). "If there are not gates, there can be no gatekeepers," Williams and Delli Carpini argue. The IGB project is a case where online media have led the way.

The McCance case exemplifies some of the ways in which traditional and new media inflect and enable self-production as a form of social action. They work together in the production of the self against the backdrop of *It Gets Better*, activating a more populist celebritized authority. New and traditional media picked up videos from the project website and publicized them as an entre' to coverage of the campaign and of LGBT bullying. These examples suggest that the website is a repository for human narratives that activate all kinds of media publicity about LGBTQ issues, bullying in general and hate speech, as well as about the roles of adults in all these issues. It

becomes a collective response by people who are, in a sense, in conversation with each other as they also directly address LGBT youth. Below I examine a prominent video on the site that expresses a somewhat different performance of cultural authority. It is an example of viral celebrity at work in conjunction with the 40,000 other videos to produce collective expertise and authoritative voice.

### **Collective Production Of Cultural Authority And Celebrity**

The project, as a site of live identity production, deploys the social-media-enabled intercommunication that Marshall (2010) articulates, where people mix the intimate with the one-to-many form of mediated communication. Corporate media production mingles with individual contributors' use and adaptation of meaning, as Jenkins (2006) describes it. Their productions are not separate from, nor entirely co-opted by, big media. Converged, in this example, does not mean subsumed. The project's individual "presentational" productions of self are a "middle ground" of self-expression, to quote Marshall, that models queer life for viewers, who can then produce their own performance of self.

While Savage and his partner, Miller, are prominent in media coverage of *It Gets Better* and for online discussion, they are part of a larger whole. Certainly Savage has become more famous since its launch and his brand exponentially more valuable. His brand in turn lends ongoing visibility to IGB. Yet the campaign is a place that breeds experiential expertise, which traditional media in this case take up and sanction. In the example below, Joel Burns, became a source for mainstream media coverage. He fulfilled both the journalistic need for expert authority as described in Chapter 1, and for a

compelling human-interest narrative. In Burns's case, he is a legitimate source by virtue of his official position, which makes him a credible source for the purposes of mainstream news.



Figure 4.3. *It Gets Better*: Joel Burns

In September 2010 Burns, a city council member in Fort Worth, Texas, spoke publicly for the first time about his experience of being tormented as a gay teenager. His moving address before council went viral in the early days of the campaign. He uploaded the 12-minute address to *It Gets Better* and it remains among the most popular of the project.

I have never told this story to anyone before tonight. But the numerous suicides in recent days have upset me so much, have just torn at my heart. And even though there may be political repercussions for telling my story, this story is not just for adults who might choose or not choose to support me. This story is for the young people who might be holding that gun tonight, or that rope, or the pill bottle.

Burns cries a number of times during his address, and struggles to compose himself. He begins to read a passage that details an incident of bullying and his panic that his homosexuality must be “showing on the outside.” He describes going home “ashamed, humiliated and confused,” and with certainty that he could never tell anyone. He begins an account of his suicide attempt, but, weeping, he skips over it saying: “I think I’m going to have too hard a time with the next couple of sentences that I wrote. And also I don’t want my mother and father to have to bear the pain of having to hear me say them.” He later affirmed to Ellen DeGeneres (2010) that he had skipped over the account of his suicide attempt.

Burns was out as a gay man but it was the first time he had shared, even with his parents and partner, the fact that he tried to harm himself as a youth. The story reverberated through cyberspace and beyond. The video received more than 2.7 YouTube hits as of April 2012, and his emotional revelation and plea to young people to stay alive, was a magnet for journalists. He appeared on national news-talk shows and print media across the United States and beyond. Within hours Burns was doing interviews with national news broadcasters and major newspapers; he appeared on daytime talk shows including *Ellen* (2010). CNN host Ali Velshi (2010) aired the entire 12-minute video and interviewed Burns. MSNBC’s Lawrence O’Donnell interviewed both Burns and his partner on his nightly show *The Last Word*. Burns’s address put a credible face on the issue from the mainstream media’s perspective. He became one of the numerous expert spokespeople on homophobia and bullying, owing to his viral digital media presentation and his credentials as a public figure.

As with the entertainment celebrities in earlier chapters, Burns served as both eyewitness and expert source for news accounts. He has authority that flows from his official position in city government. And from a journalistic perspective he has “real person” authenticity from his lived experience as a gay man. His official position enhances his credibility as an expert spokesperson. It also makes his personal story, his experiential account from the perspective of a 15-year-old boy, more compelling for the news media than if he were not speaking from the official venue. He derives expertise from his experiences of overcoming intimidation and inner torment, and authority from his public office. While he reads the words from a page before his fellow city legislators and the public, the address is one side of a very intimate conversation with gay youth. He opens himself up and shares some of his innermost thoughts and feelings. He pleads with the unknown teenager of his imagining to hold on, to not give in to despair.

This act of speaking a personal truth is powerful partly because Burns is representing only himself. His emotional appeal issues directly from his own subjectivity as a gay man who grew up in the rural suburbs of a very conservative state. Burns is taking care of business in his own back yard. He is not speaking for others, even for others in the context of *It Gets Better*, the way some of the other public officials do. He uses his bully pulpit not to lecture, but to create an intimate plea to young people like him. This very act is powerful because it is personal and even more so because of Burns’s office. It is a backstage performance on the front stage.

It is not possible for big-name celebrities such as Bono or Madonna to assert this particular type of cultural authority in the contexts they have chosen for their activist pursuits. Their social causes are far away. They step in to bridge the distance between

wealth and poverty, consumer and consumed. Their emotional appeals for compassion and hope are distant and privileged, on the sunny side of the chasm that separates dire need and privileged consumption. Their rhetoric is not aimed at empowering those who suffer. But *It Gets Better*, which addresses a problem at home, is a direct address to the sufferer and a modeling of empowerment. The A-list celebrities of the other cases appeal to powerful leaders and privileged consumers, whom they invite to *view* the Other and to feel moved, as one might with an art object.

The convergence of publicity online, on television and in print media, heightens Burns's performance of identity. All of the videos, particularly those created especially for the project, are intimate productions that directly engage the viewer as a personal conversation. Most of all, traditional and new media together amplify their production of the self. The intimacy of the interpersonal is important as it is designed to reach out to queer youth who are isolated, to give them models from which to create and adapt their own identities. The virality of their address, and its reverberation through traditional media, generates authority via a more collectivized iteration of celebrity.

This virality, and cross-pollination with mainstream media is important, for it allows the IGB project to reach extremely isolated queer people. Ethnographic research suggests that LGBTQ youth in rural areas, for example, use online media extensively to discover and create their identities (Gray, 2009). In isolated communities "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980), the denial of queerness that makes it almost unspeakable, is a powerful imperative. Queer youth "absorb and rework" identities that they research on the internet. The online stories and connections have a "realness" to them that transcends the representations that queer youth see in popular culture, Gray writes.

“Beyond a moment of visibility provided by mainstream television and film, genres of queer realness circulate compelling images of peers on a similar quest for verity and viability” (p. 1182). She argues that this “transformative power of self-identification to organize politics, culture, and intimacy depends on countless others.” It is in constant dialogue with material conditions, popular cultural renderings and an individual’s local community. Young people produce their own ways of speaking, acting and dressing in the context of all of these representations together, but online contact with the “real” provides an achievable representation of identity.

Gray’s argument that mediatized online validation is essential in isolated rural areas could apply to other isolated LGBTQ-identified people. *It Gets Better* contributors model a range of alternative performances that other queer youth can relate to, adopt and adapt. Its collective “realness” is a powerful legitimizing agent for marginalized youth. The project also makes visible representations that challenge the predominant message that Savage and Miller created, and that give voice to people in the LGBTQ community who are further excluded. While it is impossible to know what videos Savage has rejected, or where he draws the line on challenging or subversive content, the site creates a centralized location for videos by people of colour, trans people and others marginalized even within queer cultures. As I argue below, it collectivizes visibility of alternative messages and performances of LGBTQ life, and therefore produces alternative expert knowledge within the collectivized celebrity of the project.

## It Gets Visible: Speaking From The Margins And Creating Counter Spaces



Figure 4.4. It Gets Better at Brigham Young University

In April 2012, an unofficial group at Brigham Young University called Understanding Same-Gender Attraction (USGA) uploaded a video that includes testimonials from people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight allies (Wilcox, 2012). The university, owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, only began allowing people to describe their sexual orientation as other than hetero in 2007. In 2011 the BYU began to allow gay advocacy, but not gay relationships. Its honour code (Brigham Young, 2012) enforces chastity for all students, but specifically prohibits same-sex intimate contact such as kissing and handholding, which it permits for heterosexual couples. Shortly after Brigham Young University revoked its ban on gay advocacy the USGA group formed on campus. The video, accompanied by several individual videos from people who appear in the group presentation, went viral. It got almost 345,000 YouTube views in its first week and garnered significant media

attention, including speculation about whether the students could be expelled or shunned by the church. It exemplifies another way in which the project enables a marginalized group—much different than many of the others on the site because of its conservatism—to never the less be visible.

The nearly 10-minute piece opens with a student named Mark offering a starkly frank assessment: “I know you expect me to say it gets better, but if I’m going to be authentic I can’t say that. I don’t know where you are in your life right now. I don’t know what pain, what experiences you’ve gone through, and I don’t know for sure if it will get better, but people that I know that love me tell me that, and I’m trying to believe them.” The young man’s anguish is clear. He is speaking back to his community from the inside, from within the Mormon Church and its high-profile university, both of which are explicitly anti-gay. As Mark suggests, it might not get better at BYU. There is no reconciliation of queer identity and Mormon identity in 2012. Toughing it out, for someone struggling against the conflicted yearnings of proscribed faith and sexuality, will not in itself allow him to envision a future like the one Dan Savage describes.

An openly gay former faculty member, Kendall Wilcox, produced the video, which has more professional production values than many of the IGB contributions. He intersperses facts about the university’s approach to LGBT issues, such as: “BYU is consistently ranked one of the most unfriendly campuses for LGBT students in the United States. – The Princeton Review” and “74% of LGBT students at BYU have contemplated suicide. 24% have attempted suicide.” They use the expert voice to legitimate the heartfelt stories that more than a dozen LGB students (there is no trans identity in this story of Mormon youth) tell the viewer.

The students share their torment of believing that “God didn’t make me this way” and how they prayed, read scripture, lived righteous lives, volunteered within the church, all hoping that they would be released from feelings of same-sex attraction. Mark tells of attempting suicide and ending up in the hospital. Ultimately the students share their stories of praying about their sexuality, finally accepting it, and feeling an immense sense of release and spiritual love. One student, who does not give her name, expresses the power of both face-to-face support and online community:

One day I just went online and I went to message boards and on blogs and on Twitter, and I just tried to find all of my resources out there. And I was really surprised to realize that I wasn’t alone. I just found a lot of people that were supportive and willing to listen. And that eventually brought me to USGA and BYU, where my community was strengthened even more. They also are struggling with the same issues of feeling rejected at church and by their peers and their family.

This is a solidarity video, an opening salvo of visibility. It is a story without an ending, since there can be no richly fulfilled future for these students if they subvert their sexuality to stay within the church. Yet the video provides a rare glimpse into the lives of practising Mormons who are openly gay but are striving to remain in community that does not accept them. For them, being gay means only being public about their sexual orientation; it does not mean acting upon their desires to have same-sex relationships. Ultimately there is no way to reconcile their faith and their sexuality, as there might be with some other Christian traditions. Their “it gets better” story is about the relief of accepting their sexuality personally and about finding other queer Mormons and straight allies for support.

Still, the BYU video constitutes a major moment of speaking back and creating a counter space in a community that recently did not allow students to personally

acknowledge their homosexuality. Because it went viral, it received considerable mainstream media coverage, some of it speculating on whether the students could be expelled or excommunicated (cf. Siemaszko, 2012). It is a celebrated performance of difference enabled by the campaign, and the production values make it even more compelling. At the same time, it subtly pushes back against the *It Gets Better* theme and offers a look at gay life that was hard to imagine when the project launched. The video ending, with straight student allies at the university telling gay students that there is a place for them, reads not only validation but as a kind protective cover for the consequences that these particular students could face.

The BYU video leverages the cultural authority of the IGB project in order to create a counter space, not in the broader LGBTQ world, but within its conservative, isolated community. Gray's (2009) research demonstrates how essential online communication can be in such cases. The contribution also rides a wave of publicity about Mormons. Church elder and former Massachusetts's governor Mitt Romney is the presumptive nominee to the Republican presidential ticket in 2012. The Mormon Church has produced a large ad campaign of billboards and television spots aimed at normalizing the religion in a country where mainstream protestant and evangelical Christianity is the dominant political force. The BYU video is a well-timed foray into that sanctioned Mormon media space.

This production, and several other individual videos the USGA group uploaded, is not only part of the identity construction of those who made it; the videos model identity, and the possibility of visibility, for those who watch them. LGB people can find identification specific to their own circumstances, as the BYU video suggests. They can

witness intercommunicative performances of self that provide cues and assurances for them to read in a very personal way. Other queer Mormon youth can see proud people like them living openly.

The claiming of a right to be seen is not an insignificant discursive move in the social landscape. The agency that *It Gets Better* affords is of particular importance to groups marginalized within queer cultures, for example women of colour and trans people. Many of the videos from racial and sexual minorities do follow the standard line, that even for people who face extreme marginalization or violence, the future is brighter than the present. These contributions follow the Savage-Miller template hope beyond adolescence. But some contributors depart from the standard message and create emotional appeals directly from their social location as “other.”



Fig. 4.4. Kate Bornstein - It Gets Better (2010)

Kate Bornstein, an activist, gender theorist and self-described advocate for “teens, freaks and other outlaws” (Bornstein, 2006), is perhaps the best-known trans person to contribute a video. “I waited this long to post,” she says, “because I don’t always think it is going to get better. Sometimes it gets worse, a whole lot worse than I even thought...” (Bornstein, 2010). “I’ve led a freaky, geeky life,” she tells the viewer. “I’ve done a lot of things in the world that made people laugh at me, made people want to hurt me, and to the point where I want to kill myself. I can remember six times in my life that I’ve planned it all out, ready to kill myself. Fuck it. Why go on? It’s not going to get better. And each time I managed to find something else to do instead.” She gives the viewer permission to do whatever it takes, legal or illegal, “to make your life more worth living. Anything. There’s only one rule you need to follow.... Don’t be mean.... Now, if you do the illegal stuff I can’t help you. That’s the justice system.”

Bornstein articulates the particular hardship of performing a gender identity that does not fit the male-female binary. She is an “outlaw” as one of her books suggests (2006). She not only gives visibility and voice to the unique issues that trans people face, she speaks in a way that many others, including celebrities on the site, cannot. Her offering includes a ‘Get Out of Hell Free’ card, which she virtually proffers through the camera to free young people who feel that their gender or sexual identity is going to “get you in trouble with God.” She promises “I’ll do your time for you. Satan and I agreed,” so that you, the “freak” or “gender outlaw” can live without torment.

Bornstein uses the web space to make a critique from within. She makes a sharp turn from the inclusive ethos of the overall *It Gets Better* project. While she thanks Savage directly, she suggests that it does not always get better for the “freaks.” She

encourages people to do something illegal rather than harming themselves. She points out that there is no moment of *arrival* for trans people, considered to be “outlaws” and on the fringes of an already-marginalized social category. Hers is an active, not a passive message. She tells the viewer to *do*, and to do whatever it takes, to “find something else to do instead,” of committing suicide. The only rule is: Do not harm others.

Bornstein is essentially speaking against a “post-gay” (Ghaziani, 2011) ethos within the IBG campaign. For her there is no “post” moment. Her video stands in contrast to perspectives of typical contributions from well-known and ‘ordinary’ people. Many of the narratives deploy an “us *and* them” approach to hegemonic culture as opposed to the “us *versus* them” approach of social groups who seek identity through differentiation. As Amin Ghaziani describes it, the post-gay is that identity which seeks inclusion, as with gay marriage for example. It departs from that which seeks acceptance of difference, as with some pride movements, gay bathhouses and other markers of separateness. The post-gay, for many gay men, means mingling with women and straight friends in a way that was neither common nor desired in previous moments in history when assimilation was impossible (pp. 99-100). Post-gay signals identity derived through similarity, not through difference. To be post-gay means that one can de-emphasize difference and that sexuality need no longer be one’s primary identity.

The “post” is certainly not an aspiration for all queer people. More importantly it is not a privilege that most trans people have, as Bornstein’s video effectively points out. As with the post-racial, it is an identity that is designated by those who have a level of privilege. Savage is white, and male and middle class. While *It Gets Better* is in some ways inherently about difference, or about the consequences of being treated as

different, it carries a 'post' sensibility. Savage's is a story of marriage and children, of doing all the things that straight couples do. For the purposes of this project at least, his overarching message is that you too, the struggling youth, can have all these trappings of the 'post'—a husband or wife, a family, a picket fence, a stellar career.

Savage and *Glee's* Jane Lynch express this "post" ideology in a *Newsweek* interview. Reporter Jessica Bennett (2011) asks about their lives as parents. "We have the same challenges as straight families have," Lynch replies. "There's no gay way to change diapers," adds Savage. "But I think there can be a responsibility to fold in other adults," says Lynch. "I was looking around today, and we have three female cats, we have a female dog, and then we have the three of us. And I was like, we've gotta get a guy in here!" They both present a vision of queer life, here and in their IGB videos, that is predicated on the 'post.' Their rhetoric deploys a universal narrative as a strategy for asserting equality by saying, in effect, "we are just like you." And as with the post-racial rhetoric that celebrities and journalists deploy in the other campaigns, the post-gay is a source of exclusion. People like Savage and Lynch model the most "acceptable" versions of LGBT identity. In the current moment that modeling relies upon the 'post,' which is a class, race and gender-bound notion of life that assumes (or strives for) assimilation (cf. Valocchi, 1999).

And yet here, on the IGB site, is Bornstein exerting her own expertise as a "freak" and an "outlaw." The project while a burgeoning repository of "post" discourse, has become a space that highlights and legitimizes greater difference than its original critiques suggested. People identify with a range of identities and social categories in the tens of thousands of contributions, some still very marginalized. In 2012, it is easy to

find contributions from trans people, drag queens, people of colour and a broad contingent of people from various Judeo-Christian and Muslim faith traditions. These contributions collectively create a kind of experiential knowledge that works both with and against the larger post-gay narrative of the project. They provide celebrated interventions that have their own individual authority by dint of lived experience. Yet that authority has a collective volition because of the project as an archive, and because of the media's coverage of the issue and of individual cases.

One powerful video is an early contribution by Gabrielle Rivera, who identifies herself in a book of contributions that Savage and Miller (2011) compiled as "a queer born and raised in the Bronx" and a "writer, poet and director." She represents the campaign's open-endedness and space for counter-narratives. She uses the site as a forum for speaking back against the post-gay, and to offer an alternative vision of queer post-adolescent life for young people. Rivera articulates what became some of the early criticisms of *It Gets Better*, that perhaps its reassuring message best represents the privileged white male experience and the extraordinary lives of celebrities:

As a gay woman of color I just want to let the youth know that it kind of doesn't get better. Like all these straight, rich celebrities like, I don't know, whoever. I'm not even going to name them. They can tell you that it gets better because they got money and people don't care and whatever. And, like, they're coming from a good place and stuff, you know, and I appreciate that; but I'm going to be real because I live this life and I'm not rich, and I'm brown, and I look like probably most of you. First of all, it doesn't get better, but what does happen is that you get stronger. You realize what's going on, you see how people are, you see how the world is and as an adult you learn how to deal with it.

Rivera's contribution takes a more critical tack than do many that are modeled after Savage and Miller. Like Bornstein's, it has a harder edge, though the young woman by no

means rejects the campaign. She speaks from her experience as a “gay” woman of colour, and tells the audience that it does not match up with the other stories on the website. She acknowledges the dominant perspectives but her video, both her act of making it and its message, is a counter salvo from *within* the campaign. She contributes to the cultural authority of the project as do Burns and others, but her legitimacy does not issue from a sanctioned role or credential. Her critique is part of a collectivized celebrity authority that works in tandem with other often marginalized or discredited voices that appear on the site.

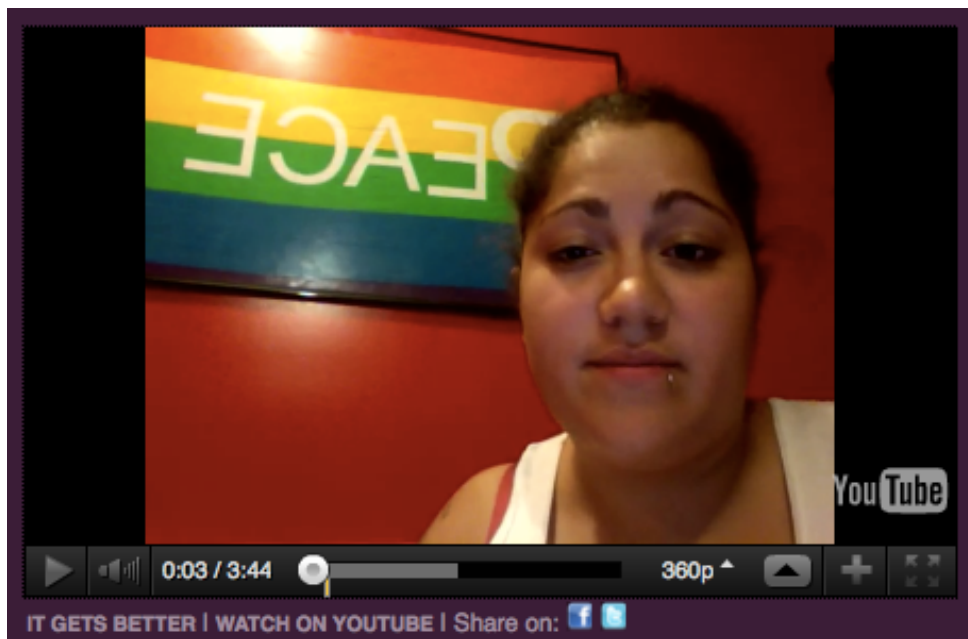


Figure 4.6. Rivera: *It doesn't get better... you get stronger.* 2010.

She responds directly to the anti-religious sentiment that some of the critics identified in the project and in the Savage-Miller video in particular. Many of the IGB videos present an overriding negative characterization of religion because of their experience with their religious community's vilification of LGBTQ people. Rivera offers

an alternative story by crediting her family, her religious upbringing and her faith for making her a strong woman. “If Jesus was alive he would chill with us because everybody else hates us,” she says near the end. “If you take your own life, they win.” She is not content to let stand the view of religion as an oppressor of queer people. Jesus was a radical, her message suggests. And those who hate in his name do not embody the principles he espoused. She claims authority to take back religion from the oppressive force that Savage and others make it out to be.

Rivera’s contribution contains a fundamental structural critique that for people of colour, gender, sexuality and race are always bound up together. If “everybody hates us” there is an even smaller circle of acceptance for women of colour. She critiques, without malice, the privilege behind wealthy straight celebrities presuming to tell queer youth that their lives will improve. She gestures to class and to the financial challenges for many women, especially non-white women. Hers is a response to privileged versions of the “it gets better” tale, such as Savage’s account of eating croissants in Paris with his son. She creates a sophisticated commentary on the intersection of race, gender class and sexuality in the United States, and of the American Dream mythology of meritocracy.

Rivera effectively questions the presumption behind celebrities speaking for the Other. She says that rich, straight celebrities cannot truly understand. While “they’re coming from a good place” they don’t “live this life.” Her critique of the prominent outsider doing good works is an elegant summary of the problem inherent in big-name celebrity activism. However well meaning they are, industry celebrities speak from a place of privilege and for the most part they cannot embody the perspectives of those they address. That connection can only come from lived experience.

Rivera's very act of making a video represents an alternative vision of mediatized identity construction. She produces difference and makes it visible as a counterweight to more privileged LGBTQ voices. Her video demonstrates the campaign's affordance of against-the-grain performances of identity. Hers generates a counter-cultural authority that is built into the project, and that gives it a populist momentum. Savage and Miller included her story in their compilation (Savage, 2011) of *It Gets Better* stories. Her offering forms part of the collective expertise of the contributors.

These examples, Bornstein, Rivera and the BYU videos, are performances of identity that are possible in the context of *It Gets Better*. The collective cultural authority, produced via a flatter more dispersed iteration of celebrity, creates space for such people to speak. The contributions from marginalized groups and individuals can leverage the celebritized authority of the whole. Individuals, in turn, contribute to the repository of expertise that is the project. Trans people in particular, but others as well, face symbolic annihilation and extreme condemnation in the world at large. In the dominant culture, trans identities remain a bastion of intolerance for a larger social structure that has begun to accommodate people of other queer identifications. Religious groups often deny their queer members' existence or excommunicate them.

The IGB web project, and the work of its collective celebrity, creates space for some queer categories' drive for visibility and sanctioned mainstream legitimacy. This matters, because in the end wider acceptance of difference is the goal. It will not come without mainstream media's publicity. If celebrity *is* cultural authority in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and if celebritized expertise is the standard ingredient in making social issues

salient, projects such as this are importance spaces for people to assert their identities and claim cultural authority.

### **Conclusion**

So what kind of celebritized cultural authority does *It Gets Better* foster?

Celebrity is a source of power and a lifestyle, as I suggested in Chapter 1. The project is a venue that that produces celebrity, and that provides a platform for micro-celebrity performances of self (Marwick, 2010). The act of speaking here is celebritized in part by the presentational media channel in which it is created, but also by the celebrities who have taken part and by traditional mainstream media outlets' publicity of the project. For the most part, these social actors do not have the kind of culture industry authority that Bono, Madonna or Angelina Jolie have. Celebrity here is more a localized, collective claim on authority to speak and to be heard. It is a performance of the intercommunicative, presentational self (Marshall, 2010).

Some of the people in this chapter have gained wider renown from their intercommunicative micro-celebrity portrayals. Joel Burns has a presence beyond the Fort Worth, Texas, community in which he is a public official. Many people who were bullied contacted him after his address (DeGeneres, 2010). Phillips, the U.S. airman who came out live, continues at this writing to generate localized fame, as defined by Giles (1999), by producing regular YouTube videos. In April 2012 he started another YouTube channel, Quickynews (2012), in which he summarizes current events in a brief broadcast-update-style news format. He has more than 11,000 followers on Twitter and he continues to generate lifestyle videos on his Areyousurprised YouTube channel. His

productions emulate existing media-celebrity genres as Senft (2008) and Marwick (2010) suggest. They have a lifestyle-television quality, or a news-update feel, however amateur.

Phillips performs for his audience as fans, and as potential customers. He raises money—for an AIDS ride, for a gym he wants to establish—all in the glow of his viral celebrity from Don't Ask Don't Tell and the *It Gets Better* project. Celebrity is something Phillips *does* more than it is something he *is*, to return to Marwick's distinction. It is a practice. He interacts with his followers on YouTube and Twitter and cross-promotes his social media production across platforms. It would seem he is using his brief debut in the mainstream media to propel his current ambitions. It is not possible to know if that was his intent from the outset, though he had been broadcasting anonymously on YouTube his experiences as a gay military member before the U.S. government repealed Don't Ask Don't Tell. It seems he is using social media, a performance of micro-celebrity, in hopes of gaining greater access than his previous 15 minutes inside the gates of the culture industries.

Many of the *It Gets Better* videos are “aspirational productions” (Marwick, p. 220), that are part of self-branding, a practice Marwick defines as marketing oneself via “the strategic creation of identity to be promoted and sold to others (p. 231). Personal branding encourages people to use advertising techniques to market themselves as product (Harold, 2012 in press). It is now, as both Harold and Marwick point out, a staple of career counseling and professional life. It is also a neoliberal move; in the work economy it transfers the economic risk from the employer to the labourer, though the

market promotes it as de facto freedom and independence (Neff, 2012). And it is an inherently celebritized practice relating to micro-celebrity.

Therefore, I do not argue that *It Gets Better* enables some kind of 'pure' celebrity, free from commodification. The big-name contributors, while not the focus of this chapter, are popular IGB viewing and the source of much journalistic coverage of the campaign. Certainly Savage's celebrity, albeit not in the same orbit as famous entertainers and politicians, gives great value to the project. He has greater visibility in popular culture in 2012 than he did in 2010 before the project went live. He is regularly in the news with the publicity he generates through his Savage U MTV program. And the IGB project does raise money for the Trevor Project and related LGBTQ services. It collects donations and sells a small selection of promotional paraphernalia. The project clearly is an aspect of celebrity as a commodity.

The self-promotional affordances of Web 2.0 are also communal. People read one's authenticity and sincerity; they are essential elements of cultural authority. People can use the online techniques of personal branding, as Harold points out (2012 in press), to varying degrees of sincerity. In other words, they can have "good ethos." In the classical Aristotelian sense they can display good character, intelligence, and one's goodwill toward the community. This does not mean that speech, as a form of persuasion and promotion, can be gussied up to simply perform good ethos. It means that some speech reaches the audience as authentically sincere because it issues from among the public. That does not mean it is above commercial trappings; simply that it rings true. I argue that many of the videos in this project have that feeling of authenticity and sincerity that give them a collective authority. The fact that these contributors are

experts, on themselves and on aspects of queer life and queer communities, has social force.

The celebrity of IGB does not displace the powerful media-industry-audience triangle that generates so much authority, consumption and money. But the collectivity of the cultural authority *It Gets Better* facilitates is significant. Despite its limitations in generating a sometimes-universalizing message that skews toward privilege, gender binaries and an elite urban secularism, the project makes space, and creates authority, for deeply marginalized contributors who seek recognition, much less broad acceptance. The project is not just telling us “it gets better.” It is not just the dominant, assimilationist, message that is important here. It is the heartfelt, assertive and dignified performances of identity that are its biggest strength. It is the fact of their existence and it is their critical mass that makes them powerful.

The Savage-Miller video probably has limited value for a teenager beginning to discover his or her transgender identity or for the Latina woman looking to reconcile community and faith, or gender and race. In other words, Savage’s celebrity is not enough. It is not the single gravitational object around which all else revolves. He is certainly the anchor, and a strong source of corporate media attention. But the project had its own momentum almost immediately after Savage and Miller launched it. It has discursive power that is not of a single person’s making.

Visibility is only part of what is at stake. As an intercommunicative performance, contributors do the work of speaking simultaneously to those whom they are addressing and to a wider audience they know is out there. Individual videos are a direct and intimate appeal to an unknown fellow traveller. As such they are models for another’s

uptake and performance of identity. At the same time they are a broader representation of an identity category that in some cases by design goes against the grain of the assimilationist perspective of the videos. Here everyone can command visibility from the outside world. The *It Gets Better* project is an incubator for a form of agency that only comes from speaking for oneself.

## **Conclusion**

### **Affective Expertise: Fame, Commodification and Performing Politics**

At the end of this project I land at a beginning. After an in-depth exploration of culture-industry celebrity as a source of sanctioned knowledge, it seemed a logical next step to begin an inquiry into newer iterations of celebrity that flow from digital media. Everyday celebrity, as I tentatively labeled it, is a processual, dispersed and interactive phenomenon that has potential to facilitate agentful productions of self. These performances begin to alter the production of fame, and enable a more collectivized knowledge. Viral celebrity creates cultural authority and has implications for the media's role in the production of celebritized expertise. Online media sites, in conjunction with mainstream media publicity, create space for people to produce their identities for progressive aims. Conversely, as I suggested, they also hold great potential for commodifying ever-greater aspects of everyday life.

Yet culture industry celebrity, where I began this study, remains undiminished as a site where consumer-citizens engage in social issues and where mainstream media go for authoritative voices on matters of global significance. I have argued first and foremost that celebrity is a powerful source of cultural authority that ultimately has a commodifying influence on social life. The news and entertainment media drive the commercialization of social causes. They take up the campaigns of big-name celebrities uncritically, amplifying their authority to speak for others. The result is a media narrative that telegraphs simple common sense answers to enormous, often-intractable global problems. The mainstream media use A-list philanthropists and activists as standard sources, under the rubric of professional objectivity, yet they generally give

celebrities a pass. They conduct interviews and research not as if they are reporting on a story with many conflicting viewpoints, but as if they are publicizing a new Hollywood film or pop music recording. As such, media coverage tends to reproduce a narrative that philanthropy is a simple non-political matter of doing good works.

Celebrity has great value as an audience drawing card. At the same time, the vocational crossings between well-known people in the journalism, entertainment, political, and even academic, fields has made fame and entertainment a primary point of access for most forms of public engagement. In ever more visible ways, entertainers become politicians and journalists; politicians become journalists, entertainers and academics; academics become media stars, and so on. We come to expect all of our prominent social actors to be famous, attractive and charismatic. For better and worse, this influences the style and substance of media coverage and also what counts as expertise.

The media's role in producing celebrity discourse is entwined with technological and political-economic conditions. The celebrity as an expert source in the news media is simply good business. This fact has a huge impact on the shifting definitions of news. Why interview a medical practitioner or a career diplomat, or local people on the ground, when a sit-down with Angelina Jolie will guarantee top ratings? News organizations promote such interviews as hard news by virtue of their weighty topics for a reader or viewer already primed by longstanding visual cues and conventions about what constitutes news. The result is mainstream media production that is easy to swallow and digest, and appears to be substantial and nutritious. However, to extend the metaphor, the celebrity as expert, as substitute for more

expensive and problematizing coverage of crucial global issues, can amount to ‘empty calories.’ That is, the celebrity, fashioned as a legitimized expert, is a source of credentialed knowledge in the public mind regardless of his or her own level of engagement. At times the result is the production of banal or even offensive ideas about social problems, such as Jolie’s statement about how she will choose her next adoptive child, or the Starbucks slogan “A Delicious Way to Help Save Lives” (Starbucks, 2009). These celebritized interventions are like fast food in terms of social engagement. They are cheap, easily consumed and high in calories.

Many industry celebrities set their sights on Africa as a place of great need. No doubt there are many reasons for this, but it is certainly difficult to look at close-up suffering, both emotionally and politically (cf. Boltanski, 1999; Sontag, 2003). Luc Boltanski, while he does not mention celebrities, suggests that contemporary humanitarianism is a “politics of pity,” that can only function as legitimate in the intervener’s mind if it seems to have no politics at all. It is predicated on difference, but one that suggests an equivalency between “spectator” and “victim” that is interrupted only by ‘luck.’ The media confer on spectators “not only the passivity of suffering, but also the action they need to take to confront and escape it” (Boltanski, 1999, p. 190). Thus celebrities, and their fans, can intervene in an individualistic fashion believing that misfortune is all that separates “us” from “them.” They can envision a free-market approach to a problem that seems to have no ideology.

The distance and the seemingly apolitical nature of the problem enables, necessitates even, that those who had ‘good luck’ speak for the apparently voiceless. Time and again campaigns and media coverage produce neocolonial tropes about the

continent, including the underlying construction that “Africans” are a monolithic people, primitive, passive, and in need of wealthy largesse and parenting. In short, they need to be saved. Celebrity campaigns and the media repeatedly invoke language of religious salvation that dates back to the colonial period. This “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972) sometimes raises money that does have a positive impact on individual lives. But it is a highly presumptive move that positions the celebrity as a saviour, usually a white saviour, in juxtaposition with distant Others who apparently have no voice or capacity of their own. The star becomes the star of this show as well; the Others are props that make the production “genuine,” or they become branded products that help campaigns make a play for consumer loyalty.

This celebritized modeling of social engagement has important ramifications for the identities of consumer-citizens and the consumed. For any campaign to be successful it must produce an audience or public. The target in these cases is people in wealthy countries who have disposable income. That is where branding comes in, the branding of enchantment to be precise. Celebrities not only give name recognition to social causes and provide a synergistic cross-promotion with other brands. They create an emotional resonance for the citizen-consumer and breathe magic into the entire exchange, seemingly making it about generosity and outward-looking ethical comportment. Mainstream media enable an uplifting politics-through-commerce by publicizing it as a viable (even preferred) mode of citizen engagement. They follow an inherent assumption that celebrity intervention, a privatized individual response, can provide a structural ‘cure.’ As such, media-celebrity publicity normalizes the neoliberal position that free-market solutions are the answer to global problems.

Sometimes campaigns ask consumers to buy products directly, as with the *Product RED* campaign. Other times they seek donations, as with *Raising Malawi* and *Water.org*. Some celebrities just use their “megaphone” to make issues salient, leveraging their profiles and personal brands, as Angelina Jolie does with her refugee work and George Clooney does in Sudan. Yet all of these campaigns and their media publicity together create a kind of enchantment that appears to give commerce a higher purpose. Enchantment, as I described, is not a spontaneous sense of wonder and generosity when it comes to consumer capitalism, although that is the rhetoric of the RED campaign. RED appears to raise culture industry celebrities “above the zone of the crudely commercial into the sanctified, quasi-religious realm of altruism and charity” (Littler, 2008). In fact, the enchantment in consumer culture is a commodified production that stands in for citizen engagement and social action, and that burnishes the celebrity brand. It is a win-win for all the corporate stakeholders. The *RED* campaign actively constructs a consumer lifestyle wherein young people can see themselves as rebels and activists through shopping. It uses Bono’s celebrity, and his sanctioned expertise on AIDS and Third World poverty, as a powerful legitimizing authority. All together, the campaign and the media make him—and the affiliated corporate *RED* brands—extremely valuable.

While online celebrity is something of a different creation, its cultural authority is not free of commodification. As I argued, people who produce themselves online, even in the context of an anti-bullying project such as *It Gets Better*, are performing micro-celebrity, a production of identity for a perceived audience or fan base. In some cases they use the online and traditional media publicity they have received to build their own

brands, emulating television genres such as reality and lifestyle television on YouTube. And many of the micro-celebrity performances of the *It Gets Better* project in effect brand queer life as a post-gay, urban white, male lifestyle that is looking for an entrance into the sanctified realms of the heterosexual middle classes. The price of admission is that gayness must be seen to model straight life in order to make it readable and palatable. Many of the IGB contributions are celebritized performances of us *and* them, in other words assimilation, rather than an assertion of us *versus* them difference (Ghaziani 2011).

Yet the *It Gets Better* project is a site of collectivized celebrity production that enables queer cultures to critique and to speak back to its dominant post-gay ethos. Perhaps most importantly it is an archive of visibility for highly marginalized queer people to model alternative ways of being in the world that are structured on difference, not necessarily on assimilation. In the case, for example, of queer people of colour and trans people this visibility is unprecedented. For people who are marked by outward difference based on race, or don't identify within the boundaries of the male-female binary, *It Gets Better* is a high profile, sanctioned location of visibility and difference. The project also creates visibility for deeply isolated rural or religious queer people, for whom there is also no "post-gay" moment in contemporary life. The visibility and alternative narratives of queerness generate collective knowledge, a kind of lived authority, that has a place to grow and multiply.

These varied kinds of celebrity—online and offline, industry and everyday—seldom work independently. There is no real way to separate them entirely except heuristically as I have done here for the purposes of provocation and analysis. That is

what makes celebrity such a rich phenomenon for examining the nature and flow of cultural authority. In its modern form it is a mediatized production, a triangulated negotiation between fame or famous person, an audience, and the media, including new media. Celebrity is created and consumed everywhere, across platforms that continue to grow and morph, and alter the nature of well-knownness and sanctioned knowledge.

### **Looking Ahead**

I suggested that this research leaves me at a starting place, rather than at a conclusion. Some of the most intriguing questions flow out of the final chapter. This initial foray into the *It Gets Better* project opens up new avenues of inquiry into the nature of contemporary digital fame. It is made of somewhat different stuff than is culture industry celebrity, though the two are intimately entwined. The fact that digital self-production frequently emulates television genres of reality and lifestyle programming makes it especially worthy of further study from the perspectives of branding and identity. It crosses over into the culture industry. But people also build celebritized authority collectively online.

This authority operates, for example, in communities such as the tech scene in Silicon Valley, as Marwick's (2010) textual and ethnographic analysis of both virtual and proximal workers suggests. People's online interactions in these communities, including their micro-celebrity performances, branding and lifestreaming for a perceived audience, is perhaps the most important field of construction for their social status and authority. The culture of Silicon Valley and other tech locations is one that is "always on" as Marwick suggests. There is no "off line." People perform constantly, moment by moment,

creating culture—and celebrity—24 hours a day. Her work suggests the need for more research into the nature of digital fame as a celebritized discourse of commodification and a source of valorized knowledge.

The audience is an important aspect of a cultural studies approach as well (Kellner, 2011), and one that I have not taken up directly here. All texts produce audiences and are subject to multiple readings; the social location and experience of the reader produce very different interpretations at times (Hall, 2001). With an online project such as *It Gets Better*, I have implied that the definition of audience becomes more nebulous. The work I began here would benefit from interviews with contributors who are an important part of its audience; contributors are clearly reading the videos in order to produce their own style and content consciously and reflexively. Given the close connection between audience and producer in this case, it would be useful to interview both some of the better-known contributors cited here and some of the lesser-known (or less viewed) individuals and groups that have been inspired to create videos.

The research in this study highlights the influence of post-gay celebritized discourses circulating in the wake of *It Gets Better*, DADT, various state constitutional amendments and President Obama's support of same-sex marriage. The mainstream news in 2012 is full of stories of long-term couples whose lives are apparently "normal," which the media coverage suggests means they have mirrored those of sanctioned heterosexual relationships. The drive for marriage equality and other queer rights in the United States is a highly celebritized effort, one that has momentum in both traditional electronic and digital media. The IGB project is one flank in that larger effort, which is itself a production of celebrity that merits further study. The voices of industry

celebrities, who have recently been weighing in on gay rights, is another avenue into questions relating to celebritization of queer representation. It is a site where industry and everyday celebrity come together in a flourish of both mainstream and alternative media publicity.

The research in this dissertation argues for the value of studying media events and sites where online celebritized activism intersects with the mainstream media uptake. The IGB anti-bullying project is but one example of how these dual modes of publicity create powerful discourses that can have a wide reach. They can become the “reality” of a situation. One such recent example is the short film *Kony 2012*, created by American Jason Russell and a campaign called Invisible Children, Inc. (Russell, 2012). Distributed via YouTube, the 30-minute film has received nearly 90-million views as of this writing. It has become a controversial access point for information about guerilla leader Joseph Kony and the campaign to arrest him.

American Jason Russell directed *Kony 2012* as part of a campaign against the violent rebel group the Lord’s Resistance Army, which has operated in Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries. The campaign that Russell and his colleagues started, called *Invisible Children Inc.* is trying to stop the LRA’s practice of recruiting and abducting children, and forcing them to serve as soldiers. It is a very personal project for Russell, who has travelled extensively in Africa. The film has received both raves and condemnations. Critics argue that it vastly oversimplifies the political situation in the region, including that Kony’s arrest is a solution, and that the film does not propose an activist response in any case. Ugandan critics also argue that

the film suggests that the country is the focal point of Kony's activities, when in fact he fled from there in 2006.



Fig. 5.1. Kony 2012 poster

From a representational perspective, the film is a celebritized production of “speaking for” a distant Other that I argued against in the context of culture-industry celebrity. This one, however, as a viral production on the internet, is not a piece whose power originates in Hollywood and other capitals of the entertainment world. *Kony 2012* produces knowledge and expertise about a distant place that is a point of access for millions of people. The film is the only information that many people have about Uganda and the main reason the country became salient in a North American media culture that tends to be relentlessly insular. Some media commentators argue it provides a limited picture at best, inaccurate at worst, and that it perpetuates the problem of the privileged white traveller presuming to swoop in and shine a light on another ‘dark’ place (cf. Gladstone & Garfield, 2012). In some analyses this celebritized production blatantly

perpetuates what writer Teju Cole (2012) calls the “white savior industrial complex.” It seems sometimes as though the only way the First World is willing to engage with the Third World is through its own spectacle.

As the Kony film suggests, celebrityized publicity about distant problems, regardless of where it originates, produces discourses that merit further study, perhaps in contrast with others including *It Gets Better*. Viral celebrity, or at least celebrity that deploys new media in some way, seems to have a growing importance to cultural authority and what counts as valid knowledge. It has a “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977), an emergent quality or a “practical consciousness” that says something about the current moment. Viral celebrity is a strand of scholarship about the activist potential and pitfalls of new media that is worth following.



Fig. 5.2. Brad Pitt: Make it Right

Another area I did not take up in this study is the use of industry fame on problems closer to home. An example of this is actor Brad Pitt's *Make it Right Foundation*, which he started in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Lower Ninth

Ward of New Orleans in 2005 (Make it Right, n.d.). The foundation has been at work since 2006 building homes, but not just any homes. Its mandate is to build 150 energy efficient and affordable homes in the Ward. This case would provide a fruitful point of comparison with the larger celebrity fixation on distant locales. It has some interesting parallels given that 98 percent of the population of the Lower Ninth Ward was African American, according to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the U.S. Bureau of Statistics (2011).

Both of these cases suggest the need to expand the work I have done here. Celebrity is, for better or worse, growing as a form of political engagement and as a powerful source of authority on some of the large structural questions that confront us. It is an enduring phenomenon, one that produces large audiences, models contemporary identity, and inspires others to produce themselves. It is also a dynamic and accelerating process and important mode of contemporary engagement. To paraphrase Marwick (2010) again, it is something one *does* as much as something one *is*. Celebrity, in all its forms, is a creature of consumer capitalism, as I said. It is about consumption as a primary point of identification and production of the self. Yet given its ubiquity, it does have potential as a form of cultural authority that can work for progressive aims. This study suggests that the forms and uses of celebrity will likely continue to evolve and that it is always a discourse that operates through, and is limited by, its inherently commercial properties and processes.

My project is not to offer solutions to the inevitable commodification that celebrity produces. Nor is it to suggest, as Horkheimer and Adorno would, that mass culture is a totalizing phenomenon that forecloses any possibility of resistance from

within. This study offers a symptomatic reading that aims to demonstrate how all forms of popular culture produce each other, and produce celebrity as a primary source of valorized knowledge. I do believe, as my arguments throughout suggest, that capitalism is an enduring ideology and that celebrity is often not up to the task of impelling social change that it sets for it self. But contemporary media life at times enables some opportunities for counter discourses and alternative ways of knowing. Those alternative discourses are equally embedded in consumer culture and in the impulse to produce, as well as in the contemporary imperative that we express ourselves and formulate our identities in terms of who we are as a brand.

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## **Vita**

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