

Book Review Forum: *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development*

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Abstract

This forum brings together a diverse group of scholars from political geography, international relations, critical organisation studies, global development, international studies and political sociology to explore the debates and dynamics of celebrity engagement with development and humanitarianism. The contributions here come from a series of roundtables organised in 2021, including one at the 6th World Conference on Humanitarian Studies of the International Humanitarian Studies Association in Paris that discussed the findings and insights of the book *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

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Introduction

This forum brings together a diverse group of scholars from political geography, international relations, critical organisation studies, global development, international studies and political sociology to explore the debates and dynamics of celebrity engagement with development and humanitarianism. The contributions here come from a series of roundtables organised in 2021, including one at the 6th World Conference on Humanitarian Studies of the International Humanitarian Studies Association in Paris that discussed the findings and insights of the book, *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development* (Budabin and Richey, 2021).

The book critically analyses the case of celebrity humanitarian Ben Affleck and his organisation the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI).¹ What distinguishes this case of celebrity humanitarianism was the fact that Affleck and his organisation aimed to carve out a

disruptive style of engagement. This was reflected in the nature of the organisation, its embrace of alternative narratives around the Congo and its emphasis on supporting local organisations. Yet, Affleck's engagement only reflected and reinforced the elite politics of humanitarianism and development. It did this through relying on a strategic management consulting firm to establish the organisation and select an issue area, quickly amassing resources from philanthropists and corporations, and when Affleck was invited to address the US Congress as an expert witness on the Congo.² Meanwhile, the ECI's disruptive approach could not be sustained due to shifting conditions in the Congo. Affleck and his organisation then turned to configuring and emphasising strategic partnerships linking public and private actors to address conflict and development.

The main argument of the book is that while celebrity strategic partnerships claim to disrupt the usual politics of development and humanitarianism, they instead lay bare the practices of elite networking, visibility, and profitable



helping that characterise these fields of North-South relations. In short, they disrupt very little. Celebrities like Ben Affleck have a long history of taking on public and visible roles in raising funds and awareness for humanitarian causes on behalf of various national and international bodies. The term ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ was coined to recognise the expanding ambit for celebritised forms of global humanitarian and charity work, though the phenomenon has accompanied humanitarianism from its early days (Richey, 2016a). The historical roots of Affleck’s twenty-first-century celebrity humanitarianism to ‘save’ the Congo can be traced back to Victorian-era work on behalf of overseas causes by E. D. Morel³ and his countrymen (Brockington, 2014: 56–7). What was the determination to ‘save’ the Congo a hundred years ago has today become the endeavour to ‘solve the Congo’, sustaining an inexorable moral impulse that links Northern do-gooders to complex humanitarian situations in the South, particularly Africa (see Fadlalla, 2019). The presence of a celebrity figure intersects with debates on the ethics of representation in humanitarianism, undermining the presentation of local solutions in favour of gazing upon a famous ‘altruistic saviour of a suffering “other”’ (Müller, 2018: 47). Further, celebrities like Affleck accompany the increasing presence of other private actors like philanthropists and corporations – except these A-listers possess the ability to attract new funding, ideas and support to establish their own organisations (see also Budabin *et al.*, 2017).

Increasing competition among humanitarian actors for funding and attention has heightened the stakes for representations of ‘helping’ such that communication, image management and even branding have become part of humanitarian interventions. These trends are visible in the pressure to build celebrity strategic partnerships to raise private funds amid the rapidly changing context of international development aid and humanitarianism. The book explores strategic partnerships that Affleck and the ECI formulated with Theo Chocolate,⁴ TOMS shoes,⁵ and then most spectacularly Starbucks Coffee.⁶ These celebrity-led strategic partnerships need to be scrutinised for their impacts, both material and representational, on the other actors in the development and humanitarian space and on the beneficiaries themselves.

To uncover what celebrity strategic partnerships are really doing to disrupt humanitarian space, the book goes behind the scenes and looks closely at the relationships celebrities create with other donors, implementers and Congolese recipients. Combining ethnography, political economy and narrative analysis, this study pushes knowledge of celebrity humanitarianism beyond critiques of mediatization or compassion-fatigued donor audiences. Findings from our deep-dive case study challenge arguments emanating from three academic areas of interest. First, international development scholarship would suggest

that in these new and ‘disruptive’ celebrity strategic partnerships, celebrity humanitarians on the ground might have acted differently from experienced, old-fashioned, traditional donors and implementers. Instead, our book shows how celebrities and their partners (corporations, capital asset management firms and philanthropists) are elite players in an elitist field who disrupt very little. Second, studies of celebrity politics would lead us to expect that the institutionalisation of a long-term investment and collaboration in celebrity strategic partnerships would make them more accountable than the more commonly found short-sighted celebrity do-gooding. Our book explains why they are not. These forms of celebrity humanitarianism maintain an ‘affective visibility’ to the benefit of elites and traditional aid actors in the field but are subjected to limited demands for accountability to any constituency. Finally, understandings of global politics might have suggested that celebrity strategic partnerships’ ability to bring together a broader range of shareholders to direct the enterprise of development would have led to better representation of Congolese voices among them. This was not the case; instead, the post-democratic politics of North-South relations was cloaked in the attractive guise of partnership.

The Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism – Miriam Bradley

Batman Saves the Congo makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role of celebrities in humanitarianism and development. Much literature on celebrity humanitarianism focuses on celebrities as advocates of particular causes including as ambassadors for various (international) humanitarian agencies. As far as I am aware, this is the first book-length treatment focusing on a single celebrity-led organisation in humanitarianism/development and as such it fills an important gap – all the more so given the number of celebrity-led organisations in existence. It is not only the subject matter but also the approach taken to studying it that is original in that it very nicely integrates narrative analysis with fieldwork and a political economy analysis. Through this approach, the book does a great job of foregrounding the ‘backstage’, something I suspect Ben Affleck and his ECI would prefer the authors had not done, but which is valuable for all those of us concerned with understanding (celebrity engagement with) contemporary development and humanitarianism.

My reading of the book focused on the politics of celebrity humanitarianism. The book has interesting things to say about at least five ways that celebrity humanitarianism is political and/or interacts with the political:

- (1) Agenda setting: What causes are selected?
- (2) Agenda framing: How are those causes represented?

- (3) What policy responses are prescribed and enacted?
- (4) What impacts have those responses had in and beyond the Congo?
- (5) How, and to whom, are celebrity-led organisations held accountable for those responses and their impacts?

Some of the findings and arguments presented in the book are broadly what we would expect based on prior scholarship on humanitarianism in general, and celebrity humanitarianism specifically. For example, it comes as no great surprise to hear that celebrity engagement tends to reflect and reinforce neoliberal discourses and practices in humanitarianism and development.

But I want to highlight instead something that particularly piqued my interest and seems to show something different is also going on, at least in terms of Batman's efforts to save the Congo, and where I am left with some questions. When I read the book, I heard two quite different stories. On the one hand, I heard a story about how Ben Affleck tried to do things differently with the ECI. For example, he sought to show complexity over a single story, and the ECI initially sought to support local initiatives and – as ambitious as it is surprising – sought to contribute to security sector reform. Yet, in practice, repeating the usual story about conflict minerals and sexual violence in the Congo often won out over a more nuanced and complex explanation, and the policy responses that the ECI enacted ended up being focused on market-based solutions. In short, Ben Affleck and the ECI claimed to want to disrupt development but ended up doing what was very much business as usual. And I think this raises a very important question: is it possible to have a different kind of celebrity and/or to do celebrity humanitarianism differently, or does this case suggest that it is not?

On the other hand, I also heard a much darker story in which Affleck's organisation comes across as a shadowy, almost mafia-esque outfit. This story came through, for example, in the idea of carving up territory or causes to avoid a turf-war between celebrities and the frankly incredible lack of transparency in terms of what money is going where – on this, Budabin and Richey's efforts to follow the money were quite revealing. Superficially, these two stories may seem contradictory, but on reflection, the fact that they are actually parts of the same story may be one of the most interesting things to take away from this book, or at least to think more about – how do these two stories or perspectives fit together? Is it the dark side of the ECI that made doing things differently both desirable and impossible? Or is it the failure to do things differently that (in part) motivates some of the dark side, including the lack of transparency? *Batman Saves the Congo* offers much food for thought on the politics of the darker sides of neoliberal humanitarianism lurking behind its celebrity face.

Dangerous Genres of Cowboy Romance Humanitarianism – Róisín Read

The book is a fascinating in-depth case study on one celebrity's move into development work. By focusing on one celebrity, in this case Ben Affleck, the book is able to explore border dynamics of celebrity humanitarianism, while at the same time being able to really zoom in on the finances and political dynamics of one organisation. In my reflection, I want to think about the story of *Batman Saving the Congo* that the book offers. The authors situate their analysis as countering the 'dangers of the single story', as coined by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) famous TED talk on the topic.⁷ The narrative of Ben Affleck attempting to save the Congo (or a part of it) clearly fits within many similar trope-laden forms of representation of the African continent that the authors explore in chapter 2 'Narrating the Congo'. However, I become less sure that there is a dangerous single story about Africa. Certainly, there are dominant frames of reference through which mainly Western or Northern audiences read the African continent. One of which is absolutely a traditional story about the need to 'save' Africans. I question the singularity of that story, not its dangers.

If we take stories seriously and look to the fields that have always done so, literary analysis for example, then a different picture emerges. What is lost in talking about a 'single story' is the complexity of stories. All stories use multiple genres. As John Frow (2014) argues, 'Genre ... is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning' (10). But stories do not "belong" to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to "a" genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation' (2). And in focusing on the development story of 'saving' the Congo, or Africa more generally, we miss the way that Ben Affleck's story uses other genres, how it is embedded within an economy of other genres.

Africa is also a dominant site of adventure, especially for the United States, as Kathryn Mathers and Laura Hubbard (2009) have written about, and this is a very American story, which I would be keen to hear the authors reflect more on. Affleck's story draws heavily on traditions of adventure stories, such as Tarzan or Indiana Jones. His visits to the Congo, where others are unable (or unwilling, or afraid) to go, can be read in this way. Africa, and especially African conflicts, have become a frontier. In the absence of new places to 'discover', the extremes of life and death, danger and the resilience of humanity can be 'discovered' in these conflicts. That it is a frontier is important as this genre connects to the narratives of the American 'Wild West', where

profiteering lawlessness prevails, in this case there are clear echoes of this with the conflict mineral narratives.⁸

In this context, Affleck is a disrupter, a cowboy hero assembling his posse of locals and others to fight. Or to use the language of the book, his 'strategic convening power' allows him to be cast in a heroic frame. It is a story of 'saving the Congo', but of a different type compared to the traditional development saviour story. Or another adventure story we can see in Affleck's is that of the 'merchant adventurers', putting together venture capital to take risky travels in pursuit of the potential for trade. This is a different kind of colonial story to that of the 'saving' of Africa, instead echoing the traders of the East India Company. In the partnerships with Theo Chocolate and Starbucks, there are echoes of this narrative, again going to a frontier to discover new resources that are desirable to markets back home. And for me one of the most interesting stories of the book was the insight into the financing of strategic celebrity and corporate partnerships. The details of the authors' search to find out what money went to whom from whom showed clearly the lack of accountability and transparency and was its own adventure. These different traditions of adventure stories already complicate the singularity of the stories we are warned about in the book.

Another important genre in the story of Affleck in the Congo is Romance. Thinking about Affleck not as Batman but as a desirable Hollywood actor, a romantic hero, tells us more about how masculinity fits into the story. One question is what Affleck gets out of this? This is not to say that he cannot have some altruist motives but that there is also a particular kind of masculine desirability associated with the caring celebrity humanitarian, or perhaps with all humanitarians, as Richey (2016b) and others' work (Mason, 2016; Toomey, 2017) on Tinder humanitarians⁹ has considered – a serious, intelligent and principled masculinity that puts Affleck in the company of peers like George Clooney at a time when he was in the midst of reinventing himself in Hollywood as a serious director. In thinking about Affleck's story as a reductive one of celebrity in the Congo, I think there is a lot more that can be explored about Affleck's own evolution as a character in the US and global imagination.

Despite the discussion of ways in which a sexual violence narrative was one of the dangerous single stories, we don't get much of a sense of how gender fits into Ben Affleck's story.¹⁰ Masculinity is central to the character he plays in this performance. Juxtaposing him to another celebrity humanitarian is useful for thinking about this, especially thinking about their differing 'affective visibility', the 'mediated performance of the emotional labor of the White Savior' (Budabin and Richey, 2021: 10). For example, Angelina Jolie is a spokesperson,¹¹ an empathetic vessel to connect the suffering to refugees to a

broader audience. In contrast, Affleck is a doer, convening strategic partnerships and channelling funds and expertise where they are needed most. Jolie's humanitarianism is connected to motherhood (Bergman Rosamond, 2016), while Affleck's fatherhood is not part of the story.

And yet, for me, the story missing from the book is that of those from the Eastern Congo. Particularly, I wonder about the experiences of the Congolese staff of the ECI, how would they tell the story of their encounters with Ben Affleck? Of their role in communicating the complexity of the stories of their lives in Eastern Congo? And how they feel about him being a spokesperson for the region? I wonder what story they would tell about *Batman Saving the Congo* and how it might reflect or differ from the rich one that Budabin and Richey have told?

Batman Saves Which Congo? – Polly Pallister-Wilkins

I'm left wondering about the geographies of Congolese aid work after reading this rich, empirically grounded book, and this will be the focus of my intervention here. In *Batman Saves the Congo*, Batman's – or to use his 'civilian' name – Ben Affleck's ECI is very quickly and unsurprisingly shown not to be the work of just Batman. Instead, we learn it is the product, in the very real sense, of a team of elite-level consultants assembled to provide Affleck with his own NGO. And this is a non-governmental organisation focused on a part of Africa beset with all the necessary stereotypical problems consumers of African misery demand; Eastern Africa is also an area as yet unclaimed by celebrity do-gooders and their coterie of consultants in a process disturbingly reminiscent of the Berlin Conference. The coloniality of the venture is front and centre and remains so as the ECI navigates 'Aidland' (see Mosse, 2011). As the name, Eastern Congo Initiative suggests, Batman is in fact not saving *the* Congo, but a particular part of the Congo. Indeed, the authors unpack the political meanings of defining the region as a relevant recipient of humanitarian helping, despite greater needs elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile, the need to claim a slice of Africa and to corner not only the aid market but also the expertise market in speaking about and for the Eastern Congo, highlights the ongoing and entirely non-disruptive coloniality of humanitarian (celebrity or not) efforts at knowledge production and dissemination from and in the Global North; these are processes that I have recently called white supremacist (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021, 2022). Through his work in the Eastern Congo, Affleck warns us of the danger of a single story; but what about the danger of a singular geography, in this case of an undisrupted 'Aidland' that forms a routine backdrop for the adventures and actions of great white men?

As scholars such as the late Lisa Smirl (2015) have shown us, aid work must be situated deeply within its own historical, geographical and cultural context. And overall, rather than disrupting existing relations of dominance and inequality, aid works to consolidate and reproduce them. In Batman's attempts to save the Congo we can very clearly see the relevance of work in political geography. This includes the role of 'hotel geopolitics' (Fregonese and Ramadan, 2015), where existing international tourist and transport infrastructures alongside unequal mobility regimes shape the capacity for aid workers to easily intervene in all their 'unbearable lightness' (Redfield, 2012). In simple terms, aid workers go to places where other aid workers are and that are accessible by airports and tarmac roads, as has been explained by development scholar Robert Chambers for over five decades. Today, actually connecting people in the field of humanitarianism and aid has moved from geographical space to online ether – what Katharyne Mitchell and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio (2017) call the 'geosocial' possibility of online spaces, where they (re)create avatars of existing inequalities. And as Elisa Pascucci (2017) has made clear, humanitarian infrastructure also facilitates research access in crisis and conflict affected settings, so not just the interventions are shaped by the system, but the kinds of knowledge we produce about them is also.

This book proves a useful lens through which to think about the continuing, (re)territorialising work of Batman's attempts to save (parts of) the Congo. There are many examples given in the book of the way the ECI rather than disrupting the geographies and coloniality of aid, actually reproduces them. From its launch on the runway of Nairobi airport, rendering the Congo invisible from the very first instance and cementing the idea of a universally interchangeable 'African' aid space, to the existing aid infrastructures of the Eastern Congo, facilitating the presence of yet another Western do-gooder bolstered by a coterie of conscious caring consultants, aid geographies and particular crisis-affected Congolese geographies are consolidated, not disrupted. Aid work is tied into wider (neo) colonial political economies that reflect and (re)produce how Congo can be categorised and understood in particular and variegated ways. Eastern Congo is separated from the rest of the Congo as part of 'Aidland', while Kinshasa is tied into cross-border, cross-continental relations and mobilities of people and goods (both licit and illicit). Meanwhile transversal, Western-legible forms of expertise are concentrated in Eastern Congo's spaces of aid that not only include Goma, but also the consultant and coffee hub of Seattle and the political belly of Washington DC.

Batman's aid work is upheld by an 'unbearable lightness' predicated on uneven mobility geographies (Redfield, 2012) that are reflected in the ease with which Affleck and his coterie of consultants move through and

across space. This ability to move around enjoyed by the ECI also crucially works to consolidate the unbearable whiteness of 'Aidland'. Here whiteness 'is the ownership of the earth forever and ever' (Du Bois, [1920] 1999: 38) and is maintained through geo-racial (McKittrick, 2006) geographies that keep the people of Eastern Congo distant and unable to access the elite spaces in which Batman has appointed himself the teller of their stories.

The 'Positive' Turn for CSR in Celebrity Strategic Partnerships? – Samantha Goethals

In contrast to other perspectives, I will probe into the 'positive' discursive turn that celebrity strategic partnerships may bring to *corporate social responsibility* (CSR). The research and analysis do a great job of critically connecting and mapping the organisation of the celebrity-sponsored policy advocacy movement for *corporate accountability* and the celebrity-led CSR development solutions that have been advanced to solve the complex governance, development and humanitarian problems that have beriddled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for many decades. The two solutions are distinct in their view of the role and responsibility of foreign businesses and the neoliberal economic system in this context. The former seeks to regulate unfettered foreign extractive activities in a conflict and weak governance zone.¹² Here, the celebrity sponsorship served to raise awareness of 'conflict minerals'¹³ in consumer goods. It succeeded in spurring a series of international regulations and certification mechanisms of mineral supply chains that started with the 1502 section of the 2010 US Dodd-Frank Act, also infamously known in the Congo as the Obama Law.¹⁴ The latter solution is the primary focus of the book. In line with the 'shared-responsibility' and public-private partnerships trend in humanitarian response and sustainable development, it builds on the liberal theory of peace through (free) trade. It seeks to harness foreign capital and work aid out of business to revive the shattered production and trade in cocoa and coffee in the conflict-marred Northeastern part of the Congo,¹⁵ all the while appealing to the ethical American consumer to buy into luxury treats and support good causes. Both celebrity-led corporate accountability and celebrity-led CSR development solutions to the humanitarian situation, however, ultimately fail to integrate and address the everyday realities, needs and problems of the Congolese people in ways that exacerbate or do little to improve already highly precarious livelihoods.

The 'positive' discursive turn for CSR lies elsewhere, in a narrative where Batman saves both the tarnished image

of the Congo and the interests of American business there in the wake of the conflict-mineral narrative and the Dodd–Frank Act. In Ben Affleck and the ECI’s story to do development through good business, the North-eastern province becomes a place that needs and is open for other kinds of trade in ‘conflict-free’ commodities. But, to recover this, it also needs investment and capacity building which American brands can support by investing and providing for through CSR. As such, besides the ‘positive’ discursive turn, there may be a positive impact of CSR celebrity strategic partnerships in the rediscovery of Congolese coffee and cocoa and, especially, in the consolidation of Starbucks and Theo Chocolate’s ethical reputation, as the partner-brands who are ready to join Batman in saving small Congolese farmers by integrating them in their supply chain, at minor costs. It is presented as a win-win-win situation: Batman saves Congolese chocolate and coffee, their producers and dependent communities, all the while providing ethical consumers a good cause to eat and drink in and enabling the brands to expand their CSR profile as investors and philanthropists.

What is most interesting from the perspective of Critical Organisation Studies is the teasing out, mapping and analysis of the complex dynamics and relationships between the celebrity and its network of policy, business and other humanitarian actors who are involved in enacting and organising neoliberal humanitarian practices. The case studies of Batman’s celebrity strategic partnerships with Theo Chocolate and Starbucks use the brands’ core activities of sourcing ‘rare’ products for ‘ethical’ and ‘luxury’ retail and consumption. Closer to the fairtrade model, this approach embeds CSR into the companies’ supply chains, all the while seeking to integrate Congolese chocolate and coffee producers in global production networks and revive production and trade. In this way, CSR for development or humanitarian causes is no longer an extra activity of the brands, but it becomes part of the business model and everyday activities for sustainability. CSR as ethical practice and for good causes underlies the life cycle of a consumer good, from production through to retail, and connects communities far apart, and not just geographically.

Despite all the brands’ and the ECI’s marketing hype, it is not clear how this CSR model can be sustainable and positive in its processes and outcomes for producers and their communities. The case studies also point to the unbalance between the claims about: the brands’ investments and ability to rebuild and revive the chocolate and coffee production in the region and the actual activities; the relationships between the brands and the Congolese producers; the limited and inadequate investments to help production and farmers; the eventually small production yields and benefits that local people derive from becoming embedded in a global production network through CSR initiatives.¹⁶

As the cases tease out those processes and outcomes at both ends of the production and value chain, the ‘positive’ development and market disruption promised through celebrity, corporate, strategic and socially responsible partnerships is definitely brought into question. The ethnographic and narrative approach calls our attention to how the construction and constitution of the celebrity strategic partnerships influence the outcomes as they build and feed into existing schemes of everyday humanitarianism that sustain neoliberalism rather than precarious livelihoods. This makes the book an essential read to better understand the role of external star leaders in organising CSR for development which contrasts with their role in disorganising rather than disrupting the fields of policy and humanitarianism.

Following the Money and the Humanitarian Ideals – Joel R. Pruce

The book *Batman Saves the Congo* is deeply researched, utilises a brilliant mix of methods of inquiry, and exposes a complex web of actors engaged in development efforts in the Congo. The book narrates Affleck’s role, from giving testimony on Capitol Hill to listening tours in Goma, and problematises the way in which the ECI assembles a strange set of allies that include Global South organisations, filmmakers, Western aid workers, brand consultants and multinational corporations, to name a few. Following the money, as the book does, reveals these partnerships to reflect traditional interests as well as an evolving set of principles and parameters guiding international development in the twenty-first century. The book is simply fun to read and adds a novel case to debates surrounding critical development studies.

My main line of critique is to wonder whether the authors are being too mean to Mr Affleck! Here’s what I mean. When I extract the timeline of events, the strategic approach, the language, and other elements described, I wonder if an alternative story could be told. Budabin and Richey clearly come down on one side, which argues that the self-assigned role of Affleck as a ‘disruptor’ of development in the Congo is either disingenuous or false. They conclude that development proceeds as it has, undisrupted, and in the process, Affleck tries to reinvigorate his image and career. This conclusion is not subtle about its critique: celebrity strategic partnerships end up largely as old wine in a new bottle. The structural dynamics that have always driven problematic development efforts persist – global capitalism, racial hierarchy and colonial legacies.¹⁷

Though, throughout the book the authors also compliment Mr Affleck and acknowledge the way in which he represents an evolved form of the celebrity advocate. He is deeply knowledgeable and respected for his

seriousness by policy makers and local activists in Eastern Congo. The ECI intentionally and sincerely seeks to grow capacity on the ground, bolster home-grown initiatives, provide access to global markets for local farmers and hires Congolese people to run aspects of the organisation. His lobbying resulted in a new special envoy post and increased flows of funds and attention to the struggles in the Congo. The ECI even focuses on state building and security sector reform in its early phase,¹⁸ which is contrary to the market-based, neoliberal approach all too typical in this space. When the ECI moves away from this frame, it seems to be responding to conditions on the ground, which sounds like a good thing. This is contrasted by the conventional foil of development that is wholly designed and run by individuals and organisations in the Global North that produce redundancies on the ground or worse, negative impacts – replicating colonial relationships that rely on narratives of saving. Affleck doesn't do these things. So I'm curious: is Batman's effort to save Congo a symptom that critiques of traditional development are penetrating the sector and have even reached beyond academic or practitioner circles to inform how celebrities approach this work? That would really be something if it is true.

Think about the historical phases of Western-led development from mega infrastructure projects of the 60s and 70s, to structural adjustment programmes of the 80s, to greater roles for the private and non-profit sectors that sprung out of the 90s and that retained the frame of earlier efforts. Celebrities have been a consistent feature of international development and transnational advocacy¹⁹ and, often and rightfully, become the subject of critique for the way in which they dip their toes in these complicated waters but remain aloof, distant, superficial and extractive, desiring a positive varnish from humanitarian engagement without doing the hard stuff. Is it possible that Affleck is actually the product of learning and growth within the sector and maybe that's something to note, if not to celebrate?

Helpful Humanitarians and the Desires of Racial Capitalism: A Response – Lisa Ann Richey and Alexandra Budabin

Affleck presented his organisation, the Eastern Congo Initiative, to a crowd of journalists at a Nairobi airport, as 'the first U.S. based advocacy and grant-making initiative wholly focused on working with and for the people of eastern Congo'.²⁰ Direct from a visit to the Congo, Affleck spoke about the ECI's mission to support community-based organisations. The launch of the ECI fashioned Affleck as a celebrity humanitarian who brought his star power into the world of advocacy and

development on behalf of the Congolese. In Budabin and Richey (2021), we explored Ben Affleck's relationship to the humanitarian and development fields as an 'influential American' who is deemed 'helpful' for some things but not for others. We focused on various economic initiatives brought by his organisation that we called *celebrity strategic partnerships*, linking traditional and non-traditional actors to promote a business solution to development.

As our response to this book review forum, we signal five areas that can direct future work in humanitarian studies on celebrity humanitarianism. First is the debate around the *individual motivations of celebrities* like Ben Affleck. The larger iconographic symbolism of celebrity humanitarianism has a structural basis. More work is needed to move past the focus on the life story, performances of authenticity, and industry-wide reflections on a celebrity's heartfelt activities. Our decision to talk about Batman as a character in our title and not Ben Affleck as a person reflects the number of bodies signified in celebrity humanitarianism when a celebrity becomes an iconic actor on behalf of others. The language of icons can help us see that celebrity humanitarians become embodiments of a lot of different places and structures of power. Thus, studying these figures is not about understanding an individual's caring or not caring about a cause. The point is that it doesn't matter. There's no reason to assume that celebrities are nasty people; there's no reason to assume that Ben Affleck is not a reasonable caring human being. However, based on the structures of the capitalist system, celebrity humanitarians are deeply implicated in the selling of desire. An entire apparatus is constructed around the people who benefit when celebrity care for 'others' is sold. Celebrities are the oligarchs of the attention economy. This will help better explain why everybody pays attention to a Batman figure trying to save the world and they don't pay attention to us. Further, as Bradley pointed out in her comments, it's necessary at times to fit two (or more) stories together that show both complexity on the part of a celebrity's actions and discourses as well as the celebrity apparatus' failure to do things differently.

Continuing the attention to bodies, the second area is the *gender angle*, where masculine desirability for Batman reminds us that there are highly gendered tropes in celebrity humanitarianism (Richey and Brockington, 2020). The roundtable called it out very clearly about Angelina being a 'carer' and Affleck being a 'doer'. And that's how celebrity humanitarianism works: celebrities are not meant to do real things, they're meant to embody ideal worlds as normative vessels. The third related aspect is *national political culture* and concerns the male celebrity humanitarian who represents 'American Heroism in a cape'. The configurations that came to

save the Congo are in many ways an American story. Here, Read's frontier reading offers a fantastic new frame for celebrity humanitarianism, where the American-ness lies in the need to impart the lesson of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

This is connected to the fourth element, the endurance of *colonial narratives* present not only in celebrity humanitarianism but also in the emphasis on buying to save distant others. These kinds of narratives of coloniality, of whiteness, are absolutely fundamental to the industry around 'helping', as Pallister-Wilkins pointed out. They are narratives of exploitation that we've seen in the Congo since the early eras of exploration. Research needs to unpack the reasons that these narratives exist and persist, and why they are powerful. It's possible that these colonial narratives reinforce dominant ideologies of whiteness because they don't seem racist, they seem helpful.

Finally, humanitarian studies can develop new understandings that move past some of the troubling dynamics of celebrity humanitarians and their partnerships to think more concretely about the *trade-offs*. Goethals reminded us that celebrity efforts to give a 'positive' discursive turn to strategic partnerships could have promoted CSR-led development solutions but instead resulted in 'unbalanced claims' around the ultimate impact on producers and their communities. Future comparative work can ask whether organisations and initiatives led by celebrity humanitarians are any worse than 'classical' aid in a system of late capitalism that is focused on profit and makes negative externalities a burden to society/communities, as Tanja Müller posed during the roundtable discussion. This query resonates with Pruce's recognition of a growth and development around the role of celebrities in the humanitarian sector that should be considered a form of progress. Such work would take into account the system of late capitalism that structures and limits the degree of disruption brought by new actors such as celebrity humanitarians, whatever their desirability (Rodney, 1972). To what extent do even superheroes face the mortal limits of racial capitalism? These five areas of focus can help scholars and practitioners who research new actors and alliances working in the fields of humanitarianism and development to better understand why celebrity strategic partnerships can be quite successful for some people, but not for others.

Notes

- 1 www.easterncongo.org/ (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 2 Affleck testified before a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee hearing on 'Diplomacy, Development, and National Security' in Washington on 26 March 2015,

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AXidnUv7kU (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 3 E. D. Morel (1873–1924) was the British founder of the Congo Reform Association, which was created to address exploitation in the Congo Free State. In the image in the following link, he is sitting in front of a map of Africa: <https://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2053> (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 4 www.easterncongo.org/about/partners/theo/ (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 5 www.easterncongo.org/about/partners/toms/ (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 6 www.easterncongo.org/about/partners/starbucks/ (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 7 'The danger of a single story', TEDGlobal 2009, www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 8 See, for example, Seay (2012).
- 9 <https://humanitariansoftinder.com/> (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 10 For more on gender in humanitarianism, see Read's (2018) research that explores how female aid workers believe they are just 'passing' as aid workers since they are not male.
- 11 For work on gender in celebrity humanitarianism, see Mostafanezhad's (2013) piece considering the wider influence of Angelina Jolie.
- 12 Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), <https://eiti.org/countries/democratic-republic-congo> (accessed 18 October 2022). Various organisations track the use of resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo; another is www.globalwitness.org/en/all-countries-and-regions/democratic-republic-congo/ (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 13 <https://enoughproject.org/products/reports/congo> (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 14 See Global Witness (2021).
- 15 See Budabin (2020).
- 16 See Richey and Ponte (2021).
- 17 See Kapoor (2013).
- 18 See Budabin and Richey (2018); www.easterncongo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/DRC_SSR-Report_20123.pdf (accessed 18 October 2022).
- 19 See Brockington (2014).
- 20 Devex, 'Eastern Congo Initiative', www.devex.com/organizations/eastern-congo-initiative-eci-33348 (accessed 22 February 2018).

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