

RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT

Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations

Politics, place and power

Edited by
Lisa Ann Richey

“This is a landmark collection. Genuinely interdisciplinary, blending empirical study with theoretical analysis, and featuring global case studies from a wide range of perspectives, it pushes debates on the impact of celebrity ‘humanitarian helping’ forward significantly, considerably advancing our understanding of the role of celebrity intervention in contemporary global inequalities.”

Jo Littler, City University London, UK

“This edited collection is an exciting addition to a proliferating literature. Rather than viewing the role of celebrities from a generic Western-centric perspective all the chapters demonstrate the importance of bringing the global South into the analysis in a nuanced fashion, with an appreciation of differences of place and context.”

Andrew F. Cooper, University of Waterloo, Canada

“*Celebrity Humanitarianism and North–South Relations* edited by Lisa Ann Richey marks a major advance for debates on celebrity ‘do-gooding’. This well-organized collection of chapters includes empirically grounded and critical analyses of cases from both the North and Global South that drastically improve our understanding of celebrity humanitarianism and its politics.”

Olivier Driessens, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

“Taking us beyond Bono, Geldof and Jolie, this comprehensive edited collection gives us the empirical depth and geographical breadth to better understand when and how celebrities matter for humanitarianism, not just in the US, but all over the world. The product of years of genuinely collaborative work, this book will broaden the horizons of anyone who thought they knew about the politics of celebrity humanitarianism.”

Martin Scott, University of East Anglia, UK

“This excellent volume provides a systematically arranged set of case studies concerning the exponential growth of Celebrity Humanitarianism. The edition will be welcomed by academics and practitioners alike as it foregrounds the Global South within this important phenomenon.”

Mark Wheeler, London Metropolitan University, UK

“Should we care about celebrities? Not at all, we might have once said, especially if our prime concerns are North–South relations and humanitarian causes. No more. This book does more than challenge such an answer, it turns it on its head. Each chapter makes a powerful case for taking celebrities seriously as agents of change – both positive and negative, and does so on the basis of careful observation and forensic analysis. Together, the authors force us to re-think our understanding of who and what celebrities are, their role in international relations, and the complex politics that forge the link between the two.”

John Street, University of East Anglia, UK

“An original and compelling book on celebrity humanitarianism. Through its rich collection of essays, it convincingly interrogates the politics of fame, pity and power at the heart of celebrity as a key form of elite leadership in global governance.”

Lilie Chouliaraki, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

“This excellent book makes a much needed contribution to the literature on celebrity humanitarianism: not only does it examine the multiple ways in which celebrities mediate elite forms of politics between the global South and North, but its empirically grounded studies of celebrity interventions in places ranging from Bangladesh, Congo and South Africa to Denmark, Australia and the US, help fill a sizeable gap in our understanding of the local impacts of celebrity power.”

Ilan Kapoor, York University, Canada

CELEBRITY HUMANITARIANISM AND NORTH–SOUTH RELATIONS

Discussion over celebrity engagement is often limited to theoretical critique or normative name-calling, without much grounded research into what it is that celebrities are doing, the same or differently throughout the world. Crucially, little attention has been paid to the Global South, either as a place where celebrities intervene into existing politics and social processes, or as the generator of Southern celebrities engaged in ‘do-gooding’. This book examines what the diverse roster of celebrity humanitarians are actually doing in and across North and South contexts. Celebrity humanitarianism is an effective lens for viewing the multiple and diverse relationships that constitute the links between North and South. New empirical findings on celebrity humanitarianism on the ground in Thailand, Malawi, Bangladesh, South Africa, China, Haiti, Congo, US, Denmark and Australia illustrate the impact of celebrity humanitarianism in the Global South and celebritization, participation and democratization in the donor North. By investigating one of the most mediatized and distant representations of humanitarianism (the celebrity intervention) from a perspective of contextualization, the book underscores the importance of context in international development.

This book will be of interest to students and researchers in the fields of development studies, celebrity studies, anthropology, political science, geography, and related disciplines. It is also of great relevance to development practitioners, humanitarian NGOs, and professionals in business (CSR, fair trade) who work in the increasingly celebritized field.

Lisa Ann Richey is Professor of International Development Studies in the Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University, Denmark.

CELEBRITY HUMANITARIANISM AND NORTH–SOUTH RELATIONS

Politics, place and power

Edited by Lisa Ann Richey

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Dedicated to Sandra Ann Richey,
who might just have a copy of *The Star* lying around near her chair

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CONTRIBUTORS

Dan Brockington is a Professor of Conservation and Development at the School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, UK. His research covers diverse aspects of development, with much attention on the dynamics of long-term livelihood change (especially in Tanzania) and the social consequences of conservation policy (globally). His interest in celebrity stems from exploring the role of celebrity in environmental affairs, and this has led to an examination of its role in development more broadly. This means his research spans remote village locations to plush fundraising events, which can be confusing. His books include: *Fortress Conservation* (2002), *Nature Unbound* (with Rosaleen Duffy and Jim Igoe, 2008), *Celebrity and the Environment* (2009) and *Celebrity Advocacy and International Development* (2014).

Lene Bull Christiansen is an Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Identity at Roskilde University, Denmark. She holds a PhD in International Development Studies from the same institution and holds a post-doctoral research grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research. Her research focuses on Danish celebrity involvement in development aid campaigning. She organizes the Roskilde University-based research cluster Celebrities as New Global Actors, and is a Core Researcher of the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Alexandra Cosima Budabin is a Center for Human Rights Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor at the University of Dayton, USA. She holds a PhD in Politics from the New School for Social Research (USA). Her work focuses on non-state actors in human rights, humanitarianism, genocide, and conflict resolution. A Core Researcher of the Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations, Alexandra has written about Mia Farrow and Ben Affleck.

Johanna Hood is an Assistant Professor of International Development Studies at Roskilde University, Denmark. She received her PhD from the University of

Technology, Sydney, in International Studies. Beyond examining alternative forms of celebrity, Johanna's research interests include the impacts of race and ethnicity on media and public health campaigns, welfare in China, and China's plasma economies. She is the author of *HIV/AIDS, Health and the Media in China: Imagined Immunity through Racialized Disease* (2011). Johanna is a Core Researcher of the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Mary Mostafanezhad is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Mary's current research is situated at the intersection of critical geopolitics and cultural and development studies and explores popular humanitarianism in several contexts including tourism, fair trade, celebrity humanitarianism and corporate social responsibility. Mary is the author of *Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times* (2014) and co-editor of *At Home and in the Field: Ethnographic Encounters in Asia and the Pacific Islands* (2015) and *Moral Encounters in Tourism* (2014). She is also a board member for the Association of American Geographers Recreation, Tourism and Sport Specialty Group, the co-founder of the American Anthropological Association Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group as well as the Critical Tourism Studies Asia-Pacific Consortium, an affiliated faculty member in the Thai Studies Department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and an affiliated researcher in the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Danai Mupotsa is a Lecturer in the School of Literature, Language and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. She received her PhD in African Literature from the same institution. Areas of interest include performance studies, queer theory, gender, sexualities and feminist theory, affect theory, new materialisms, visual analysis, critical race theory, popular culture, psychoanalysis, and Southern African, North American and Caribbean literatures.

Mette Fog Olwig is an Assistant Professor in International Development Studies at the Department of Society and Globalisation at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research has included projects on ethical production, investments and consumption, and the social dimensions of climate change and development in Ghana, Tanzania and Vietnam. She received her PhD in Geography from the University of Copenhagen. Mette is a Core Researcher of the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Louise Mubanda Rasmussen is an Assistant Professor in International Development Studies at the Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University, Denmark. She holds a PhD in African Studies from the University of Copenhagen. Her work focuses on the interrelations between representations of development and local practices of development, with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS interventions implemented by local NGOs and faith-based organizations. She is currently working on a post-doctoral research project entitled "Madonna's Malawi: celebrity and the NGO economy" funded by the Danish Research Council for the Social Sciences. Louise is a Core Researcher of the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Lisa Ann Richey is Professor of International Development Studies and Director of the Doctoral School of Society and Globalisation at Roskilde University, Denmark. She also serves as Vice-President of the Global South Caucus of the International Studies Association (ISA). She is the author of the books *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World* with Stefano Ponte (2011), *Population Politics and Development: From the Policies to the Clinics* (2008), and the co-editor with Stefano Ponte of *New Actors and Alliances in Development* (2014). She works on new actors in international aid, citizenship and body politics, and gender and the global South. She leads the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations: <https://celebnorthsouth.wordpress.com/>

Annika Bergman Rosamond is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden. She is also the director of a faculty-wide MA programme in Global Studies. Her key research interests include celebrity activism and international relations, gender, feminism and international relations as well as broad debates in cosmopolitan theory and security studies. She is the editor of *War, Ethics and Justice: New Perspectives on a Post-9/11 World* (with Mark Phythian 2012). Annika is a Core Researcher of the Research Network on Celebrity and North–South Relations.

Anke Schwittay is a Senior Lecturer in the Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. She earned her PhD in Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley. Anke is the author of *New Media and International Development: Representation and Affect in Microfinance* (2014).

Robert van Krieken is Professor of Sociology at the University of Sydney and Visiting Professor at University College Dublin. His research interests include the sociology of law, criminology, the sociology of childhood, processes of civilization and decivilization, cultural genocide, and the history and sociology of celebrity, as well as contributing to the theoretical debates around the work of Elias, Foucault, Luhmann and Latour. Previous books include *Norbert Elias* (1998), *Celebrity and the Law* (2010, co-authored) *Celebrity Society* (2012) and *Sociology*, 5th edition (2014, co-authored).

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INTRODUCTION

Celebrity humanitarianism and North–South relations – politics, place and power

Lisa Ann Richey

As I wrote this book introduction, North–South relations were pessimistically characterized by a tone of humanitarian crisis over how to respond to the worst outbreak of the Ebola virus in history. During this time, I was receiving social media updates from a former student I taught in South Africa, whose profession as written on visa forms is “humanitarian.” He was working as the first emergency response team director treating Ebola in Liberia. He lamented the lack of attention and resources that had been committed to fight the disease. Ebola became a symbol of “the moral bankruptcy of capitalism” as coined by John Ashton, the president of the UK Faculty of Public Health.¹ The US had promised to send troops, and the Cubans had pledged to send doctors, but in the early stages of the Ebola crisis, no one offered to send celebrities.²

Then, as reported by *The Independent* newspaper in the UK, Sir Bob Geldof received a call from the UN that the Ebola virus was “getting out of control” so he decided to re-record the Band Aid single from 30 years before to “just stop Ebola.”³ *Do They Know it's Christmas?* was re-released and immediately became the number one ranked song in 63 countries. The internet was awash with a wide spectrum of reactions to the new Band Aid, creating what optimists might consider a global public sphere for debating the role of celebrities in humanitarianism, the appropriate place of African artists in solidarity movements for Africa and whether or not the damage done by the outdated lyrics: “Well tonight thank God it’s them instead of you” could be repaired with the hurried change to “Well tonight we’re reaching out and touching you.” While all the intrigue of which stars were in and which were out of Bob Geldof’s passion play pervaded the global popular media, the public remained uninformed about even the most basic aspects of the initiative: where would the money raised by the single actually go?⁴

We know from nearly a decade of attention paid to global humanitarianism of the photogenic variety that “offering support for global charities has become practically part of the contemporary celebrity job description and a hallmark of the established star” (Littler 2008, p. 237). Selling products to “help” distant others, be it Band Aid or “brand aid,” has linked celebrities and corporations to global humanitarian causes in unprecedented ways (Richey & Ponte 2011). Correspondingly, the development sector and the celebrity industry have increasingly formalized relationships, based on a cadre of full-time celebrity liaison officers in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and specialized talent agencies linking performers to philanthropic causes (Brockington 2014). Geldof’s spectacle was only the tip of the iceberg of celebrity humanitarianism for Ebola. There was also a scaled-up global health response from philanthropist George Soros and the “aid celebrity” Dr. Paul Farmer (Richey & Ponte 2011);⁵ “the Ebola Fighters” were named *Time* Magazine’s Person of the Year for 2014;⁶ a total of \$1.5 billion was eventually committed by public and private donors;⁷ and my former student’s co-worker was invited to the White House to participate in the US’s State of the Union Address on behalf of “thousands of Ebola health care workers.”⁸

When celebrities become involved in North–South relations money is pledged, individual and institutional networks are mobilized, and attention is drawn toward



FIGURE 0.1 Dr. Pranav Shetty, shown here in the field, was invited to sit with US First Lady Michelle Obama for the 2015 State of the Union Address. Born in India, raised in Trinidad, trained in the US, an humanitarian volunteer, he is the Global Health Emergency Coordinator for International Medical Corps. Photograph by International Medical Corps.

particular crises, and away from others. What are the specific configurations of power that take place when celebrities engage in humanitarianism? Does celebrity engagement provoke similar responses in different places across the globe? And what does this mean for humanitarian politics? This book aims to better understand the relationships of politics, place and power in grounded studies of celebrity humanitarianism.

Ebola, like the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s and its Band Aid response, provides the perfect catalyst for contemporary celebrity humanitarianism. As explained by Müller: “A disaster like a major famine makes it easier to uphold the fantasy that, in alleviating concrete suffering or preventing starvation, we contribute to justice; it should thus come as no surprise that a famine gave birth to Band Aid ‘common-sense humanitarianism’” (Müller 2013, p. 481). The cutting edge of contemporary scholarship on celebrity engagement with humanitarian interventions suggests that populist celebrity advocacy marks a disengagement between the public and politics across North and South. Celebrity humanitarianism and development advocacy, argues Brockington (2014), is the terrain of elites in the North, in spite of popular misconceptions that celebrities are successful because of their appeal to “the people.” Critics like Littler (2008) and Kapoor (2013) argue that celebrities actually appeal to “the people” by playing with the humanitarian needs of “others” – effectively selling the poor for profit in global capitalist relations – and making celebrity humanitarianism inherently destructive for the South. In contrast, supporters like Cooper (2008) suggest that celebrities can be an innovative, positive force in “changing the world” by forging new diplomatic links across contexts. Yet social theorists like van Krieken (2012) chart convincingly that celebrity politics is nothing new, and that the history of celebrity humanitarianism runs alongside “development” and the drive toward “modernity.” Thus, we might assume that celebrity and North–South relations are intertwined, perhaps even in ways that we did not imagine.

Academic discussion over celebrity engagement is often limited to theoretical critique or normative name-calling between “the skeptics” and “the optimists” (Chouliaraki 2013, ch. 4), without much grounded research into what it is that celebrities are doing, the same or differently – in different or even the same places – throughout the world. This book provides a critical investigation into what celebrity humanitarianism in North–South relations suggests for contemporary configurations of *politics, place and power*. We examine *politics* to understand how values are linked with authority in global constellations of humanitarian helping, and in local recipient environments. We investigate the importance of *place* and context, and each chapter presents new empirical findings on celebrity humanitarianism on the ground in Thailand, Malawi, Bangladesh, South Africa, China, Haiti, Congo, US, Denmark and Australia. Celebrity interventions provide an empirical focus point for studying the relations of *power* that may be reproduced or disputed from one context to another. We gaze through the keyhole of “celebrity” in order to investigate fundamental concepts such as accountability, agency, authenticity, brand, development, mediation, humanity, inequality, pity, public engagement and representation.

Why is it important to understand celebrity humanitarianism?

Celebrity engagement in humanitarian causes and development interventions has raised the interest levels of numerous publics in both North and South. It has sparked a growing academic debate across disciplines and has been the subject of heated popular debate as well. Scholars, students and the general public are quick to support some celebritized causes and to condemn others. The terrain of intervention in development and humanitarian causes is changing rapidly with the engagement of new actors, relations and alliances across geographical, financial and political distances. But these changes come into a context of historical familiarity (see Littler forthcoming), and alongside long-established socioeconomic and political power relations, as reactions to Ebola clearly show.

We have scholarship that suggests that celebrity involvement changes humanitarianism in important ways. For example, celebrity humanitarianism has been held responsible for reproducing “neoliberal subjectivity” (Biccum 2007), and for “establishing a hegemonic culture of humanitarianism in which moral responsibility . . . is based on pity rather than the demand for justice” (Müller 2013, p. 470; Boltanski 1999). Thus, celebrities need to be understood in their function as new actors in North–South relations. In her engaging book documenting changes in humanitarian communication over the past four decades, Chouliaraki argues that we have moved into the “post-humanitarian” age, in which solidarity is driven by neoliberal logics of consumption and where utilitarianism and doing good for “others” depends on doing well for yourself. As Chouliaraki describes, celebrity humanitarians are at the forefront of this societal shift:

The tearful celebrity, the rock concert, the Twitter hype and the graphic attention are . . . prototypical performances of post-humanitarianism which limit our resources for reflecting upon human vulnerability as a political problem of injustice and minimizes our capacity of empathy with vulnerable others as others with their own humanity.

(Chouliaraki 2013, p. 187)

Celebrity humanitarianism can be read as a performance between the celebrity as benefactor and the public for whom the celebrity functions as a proxy philanthropist. As Duncombe has illustrated, “The ‘humble roots and common tastes’ celebrity stories not only make this contemporary Pantheon of Gods acceptable to a democratic audience . . . they also hold out the promise that this can happen to you” (2007, p. 108). The popular attraction to celebrity fantasies is linked to a life without consequences, an escape into activities with no agency (*ibid.*). Thus, celebrity humanitarianism provides the possibility to vicariously participate in the caring activities of our favorite celebrities, while disengaging from the consequential activity of what “really” happens in international development or humanitarianism on the ground.

Questions of power, accountability, and who actually constitutes “the public” of North–South relations need academic investigation. Chouliaraki also emphasizes

that humanitarian communication in the new media favors partial, personal readings as opposed to more objective, shared interpretations of humanitarian problems, and thus is less effective at integrating audiences and providing a shared foundation for collective action (ibid). Therefore, critical scholarship must question the “optimists” who lead us to believe that globalization and mediatization are permeating all corners of the globe and “networking” everyone, while leaving isolation, misunderstanding and callousness as part of a “pre-humanitarian” past (for a useful overview, see Robertson 2015). Crucially, little scholarly attention has been paid to the Global South, either as a place where celebrities intervene in existing politics and social processes, or as the generator of Southern celebrities engaged in “do-gooding” (Littler 2008). This edited book is about what a diverse roster of celebrity humanitarians are actually doing in and across Northern and Southern contexts.

Situating celebrity humanitarianism within contemporary academic debates

Celebrities are now an increasingly studied topic on their own terms, with a history of critical concern for the relationship between celebrities and politics that Wheeler dates back to the German sociologist Leo Lowenthal’s (1944) critique of the replacement of “idols of production” such as politicians with “idols of consumption” such as film stars (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). Contradicting some fundamentalist academic presumptions that scholarship on celebrity would be a purely cultural, fun and dumbed-down area of inquiry, the introduction to the first volume of the flagship journal *Celebrity Studies* could be productively confused with describing the goals of social science inquiry, or perhaps the discipline of anthropology. In the journal introduction Holmes and Redmond specify that the aims of celebrity studies are “to defamiliarise the everyday, and to make apparent the cultural politics and power relations which sit at the center of the ‘taken for granted’” (2010, p. 3).

This book takes up this call to “defamiliarise” celebrity humanitarians with whom many Western media consumers have become saturated – such as the pop singer Madonna or the actress Angelina Jolie – while also making apparent the politics and power relations constituting important interactions in less visible “celebrity societies” (van Krieken 2012) such as those in Bangladesh, South Africa or China. We know that celebrity engagement in humanitarianism has become increasingly prominent and the subject of debate in academia and the popular media, yet we are lacking when it comes to a grounded understanding of the importance of context and the differences of politics, place and power in shaping celebrity engagements in North–South relations. This leads us to consider a series of questions: Which publics are engaged, through which celebritized means and what does this mean for politics and how development and humanitarianism are “done”?

Wilson (2011) argues that celebrities represent a form of global governmentality that brings Western audiences into alignment with international programs. Celebrity advocacy is assumed to preserve stereotypes, particularly about the Western Self and the “Other,” which fit conveniently into the wider discourse

of assumptions about the natural order of world politics (Repo & Yrjölä 2011). When celebrities have taken on humanitarian causes, acting as “aid celebrities” (Richey & Ponte 2011) to promote international development or as celebrity diplomats (Cooper 2008) across North–South contexts, they have typically received academic criticism.

This book speaks to three relevant literatures for the study of celebrity humanitarianism: (1) *the interdisciplinary literature on aid celebrities* (primarily from the fields of international development studies and geography); (2) *the literature on celebrities and representation of “Others”* (particularly from media and communications studies, cultural studies and anthropology); and (3) *the emerging literature on new actors and alliances in North–South relations* (drawing on international relations and global studies). Scholarship on celebrity do-gooding in transnational contexts of humanitarianism, development and diplomacy has been blossoming in diverse specialist and interdisciplinary journals within these three research categories (Brockington 2014; Chouliaraki 2012; Dieter & Kumar 2008; Goodman & Barnes 2011; Huliaras & Tzifakis 2010; Littler 2011; Müller 2013; Repo & Yrjölä 2011; Scott 2014; and Wheeler 2011).

Celebrity humanitarianism can be best understood through the consideration of key books which have been published over the past couple of years analyzing the multifaceted nature of celebrity humanitarianism from a rigorous academic perspective. From *the interdisciplinary literature on aid celebrities*, two different and critical books have taken on celebrity interventions in North–South relations. The most significant book in the field of empirically-grounded work on celebrity and development (Brockington 2014) focuses exclusively on celebrity advocacy and lobbying in international development, examining its history, relationships, consequences, wider contexts and implications. Brockington argues that celebrity advocacy signals a new aspect of elite rule. From an in-depth analysis of actual celebrity advocacy in Britain, and drawing on some comparative material from the US, we understand how corporations, politicians and the NGO community have begun to orient around the aura of celebrity. A pragmatic conclusion suggests that if development is to work better, it must negotiate within this new terrain of celebritized relationships. A significant theoretical critique of celebrity humanitarianism is provided in the book by Kapoor (2013) on celebrity humanitarianism. Kapoor claims that celebrity legitimates and promotes neoliberal capitalism and global inequality. This polemic engages an ideological critique, drawing heavily on the theories of Žižek, to argue that celebrity humanitarianism is a moral spectacle that entwines frenetic development NGOs, big business and sexy stars. Kapoor illustrates how celebrities’ involvement in international development advances the celebrity brand and contributes to a “post-democratic” political landscape managed by unaccountable elites.

From *the literature on celebrities and representation of “Others,”* a seminal text has been published by Chouliaraki (2013) arguing that contemporary humanitarianism is under pressure from economic, political and technological transformations which have significantly altered the possibilities for global solidarity. She shows

how international development aid has become instrumentalized as international organizations and NGOs compete for market share and donor funding, while the scholars focus on administrative policy rather than critical, normative theory. Simultaneously, argues Chouliaraki, the grand narratives of solidarity have been replaced by individualist projects. This is linked to changes in technology and new media forms where audiences in the North have become both producers and consumers of a public communication that obfuscates the distant “Others.” Coming from media and communication studies, the book considers solidarity as “a problem of communication,” and analyzes humanitarianism as performance, providing a convincing argument for scholars of humanitarianism that communication matters: words and images perform and significantly shape social reality across North–South relations.

Third, from *the emerging literature on new actors and alliances in North–South relations*, Mark Wheeler’s (2013) monograph, *Celebrity Politics*, looks specifically at the engagement of celebrities in “traditional” politics. Drawing on the foundational work of John Street (Street 2004, 2010, 2012) for understanding celebrities doing politics and politicians performing as celebrities, Wheeler makes the case that “traditional civic duties are being replaced by alternative forms of virtuous participation” and that celebrities are actually engaging the public in politics (2013, p. 2). While the book’s scope includes both national and global politics, the specific claims about celebrity transnational activism are based on the workings of celebrity diplomats (drawing on the classic Cooper 2008) and global activists (from the first book to examine this: Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos & Huliaras 2011). Wheeler offers a taxonomy of celebrity politics that can provide a macro-level, sense-making framework for understanding a variety of celebrity engagements in diverse places.

All of these books and the articles mentioned at the beginning of this section have created knowledge about what Driessens (2013, p. 546) terms “the celebrity apparatus,” which consists of the celebrity, the media, the public and the celebrity industry. However, the existing literatures still lack, for the most part, any empirical grounding from the side of the recipients of humanitarian “help.” The chapters in this book begin to build up the research corpus necessary to develop an understanding of celebrity humanitarianism that moves between Northern and Southern perspectives, and to test existing theories of celebritized intervention for “fit.”

The next section will provide an introduction to the critical concepts in understanding celebrity to be grounded in the following chapters in this book, starting with the concept at the core of our common enterprise, “celebrity.”

Defining the concepts: “celebrity,” “North–South relations” and “humanitarianism”

How do we make “celebrity” a theoretical concept that helps us to understand something about the constitution of our social world in the contemporary period of North–South relations? Our book focuses on the conceptualization of celebrity humanitarianism in order to stress the modality of interaction, and we are not

engaging in the debates over what a “real” celebrity is, whether limited to the Hollywood A-list or expanded to include anyone with more than a handful of followers on social media. Celebrity constitutes an intellectual space where questions of authenticity, accessibility, popularity and brand can also be interrogated. However, it is important to clarify that this conceptualization is functionalist in its intentions: the point of this collection is not to understand celebrities as humanitarian actors in order to better understand the nature, function or relevance of celebrities. We argue instead that it is necessary to understand how celebrities function as new actors, to better understand contemporary processes of North–South relations of humanitarianism, development and, following Brockington (2014), of elite rule in post-democracy. One need not buy into a historically deterministic grand theory of representation and democracy to recognize that there are new alliances and competitive spaces that shape the ways that North–South relations are conceived, and celebrities have become increasingly visible as part of the “development” brand (Richey & Ponte 2014).

Celebrity

Since the purpose of this book is to use “celebrity” as an instrumental concept, and other recent work has reviewed the literature on its various definitions in scholarship (Driessens 2013), here I will discuss only briefly how this book engages with the celebrity concept and why the findings in the following chapters suggest that “celebrity” is a concept in need of further development. Driessens (2013) presents a “tentative mapping of celebrity definitions” that is organized along the components of the “celebrity apparatus” (celebrity, the media, the public and the celebrity industry). In our approach to celebrity humanitarianism, we focus primarily on two of these components: the celebrity and the public. Thus, theoretically, we considered defining celebrity as put forth in Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). They define “celebrity” as a state of superiority in a world where opinion is the defining instrument for measuring different orders of “greatness.” In their approach, being a celebrity is characterized by having a widespread reputation, being recognized in public, being visible, having success, being distinguished, and having opinion leaders, journalists and the media as your testimonials (ibid. pp. 222–30). The test of celebrity is the judgment of the public – but who are the celebrity public in the context of North–South relations? The chapters in this book demonstrate how celebrity humanitarians are constituting “caring” publics and particular politics. For example, in chapter 4, Mupotsa introduces us to the celebrity philanthropy of Sophie Ndaba, whose spectacular orphan benefit/wedding event became a way for South Africa’s newly rich “Black Diamonds” to “give back” to needy “others” who are not constituted by the expected distances of race, geography or culture. Chapter 8 challenges us to consider how celebrities costumed as genitalia for a development fundraising show in Denmark can amalgamate popular opinion in favor of international aid, while offending both the “others” of the aid itself and many others in the donor North.

Instead of focusing analytically on celebrities as actors, the authors in this collection engage celebrity actions, the processes of making an intervention in North–South relations, as a celebrity humanitarian. When considering how to reconcile analytically such diverse examples of celebrity humanitarians as Angelina Jolie, the A-list Hollywood actress (featured in chapter 1) with Mohammed Yunus, the Bangladeshi founder of the Grameen Bank (featured in chapter 3), we draw foundationally on Brockington’s definition of “celebrity”:

Celebrity describes sustained public appearances that are materially beneficial, and where the benefits are at least partially enjoyed by people other than the celebrity themselves, by stakeholders whose job it is to manage the appearance of that celebrity. According to this definition, members of the public interviewed by roving reporters would not be celebrities. Academics promoting their books in the media would qualify if those media opportunities were provided by an agent promoting their book.

(2014, p. xxi)

This definition is useful for orienting contextually grounded studies because it focuses on the materiality of celebrity as performance for profit. It is also a functionalist argument: celebrities are such because they function as such – there is no ontology in celebrity *per se*. This allows for significant flexibility in the concept: to include non-film stars and those who claim to be anything but celebrities. The celebrities under study in this book are both individuals from the entertainment industry who cross over into fields of humanitarianism and international development, as well as experts (intellectuals, politicians, professionals) who are reconfigured as celebrities vis-à-vis the mediatization of their persona.

Just as celebrity itself is an unstable category (see Driessens 2013, p. 557), celebrity humanitarian may be a category that can change over time or with place. For example, chapter 7 suggests that the actor Sean Penn may be considered a celebrity humanitarian of considerably more standing in Haiti than in the US.

Humanitarian celebrities provoke questions about mediatization, representation and aspirational distance. When celebrities are “narrowcasting” representations of the relationship between North and South (images of global inequality, of transnational need, etc.) what is their context? Which audiences are being targeted? Which audiences are reached? What are the geographical and cultural boundaries of the celebrity engagement? What are the identities and practices represented to these audiences? Is there any possibility for interrogating these representations of North–South relations? If so, who does that and from which standpoint do they claim to speak?

North–South relations

To define the scope of celebrity action across these texts a term is borrowed from international relations and development studies – “North–South relations.” The traditional meaning of this term is drawn from political science descriptions of