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Introduction: celebrities for/against Trump

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Perhaps the academic disclaimer ‘at the time of writing’ has never been so unavoidable, and at the same time so futile, as in the era of Trump. Since the 45th president of the United States took office in 2017, the span of the news cycle seems to have been reduced to the average time gap between two of Trump’s rapid tweets. No matter how hard political historians, sociologists or media studies scholars attempt to keep up, it seems almost as if their research projects are destined to be outpaced by the train of events making up this presidency. However, it is important that we remind ourselves that breaking news and scoops are the stuff of journalism, instead of criteria for the value of academic research, and that relevance is never to be reduced to recency.

The four authors whose Forum contributions are collected here in a special issue of the Forum, themed on ‘Celebrities for/against Trump’, have all attempted to single out and close-read media events that have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the fast-paced history of Trump’s presidency. Those events may have been followed by many new developments, redirecting our attention elsewhere, but that has certainly not affected the timeliness of the authors’ analyses. Quite on the contrary, in fact: later turns of events have brought about just how timely, and even foretelling, these contributions continue to be.

These four pieces are not the first, of course, that signal that Trump has caught the attention of scholars in the field of celebrity studies. The phenomenon of the reality television personality-turned-president has been analysed extensively (see, among many other publications, Kellner 2016, Street 2019, McDonnell and Wheeler 2019, Biressi 2020, Prins 2020), from a wide variety of perspectives. In general, however, these publications tend to focus on the celebrity *of* Trump. What makes the contributions collected in this Forum stand out, is that they focus on the relations between particular celebrities *and* Trump. As celebrity culture reflects as well as refracts the tensions and divisions that characterise contemporary societal dynamics, those relations are as polarised as in American society at large, varying from biting critique to passionate endorsement. The list of stars who have publicly taken a position for or against Trump is obviously long and diverse, so there are numerous others that could have been the focus of attention in this special issue – Meryl Streep, Robert De Niro, Mark Ruffalo, Clint Eastwood, Mike Tyson, Dennis Rodman, to name just a few – but every celebrity covered in the selection presented

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here offers some unique insights in the vexed relation between Trump and other media personalities nonetheless.

In his contribution, Alex Symons takes a closer look at Sarah Silverman's satirical swipes at Trump. The American comedian has delivered highly provocative attacks on Trump through her Twitter account; additionally, she has appeared on television in character as Hitler, to complain about comparisons between 'herself' and the American president. Symons analyses Silverman's tricky balancing act: in order to successfully deliver attention-grabbing satire, she has to match the shocking and 'carnavalesque' behaviour of the president, while at the same – like other famous women comedians – she is expected to live up to expectations of traditional femininity.

Another famous comedian takes centre stage in Amy B. Becker's contribution: this author revisits her previous experimental research (Becker 2018) on American viewers' responses to Alec Baldwin's presidential impersonations on *Saturday Night Live* as well as Trump's negative reactions to *SNL* on Twitter. Interestingly, Becker observes that exposure to Baldwin's version of Trump alone results in more negative evaluations of the president across a variety of political character traits; yet viewing Baldwin's performances followed by Trump's response to *SNL* via Twitter has a positive affective function: this reinforces perceptions of a humane and authentic Trump. It appears once more, then, that is not that easy to tarnish Trump's celebrity.

The two other authors contributing to this Forum focus on celebrities that have endorsed Trump. Carlton Brick reflects on Kanye West's profoundly puzzling relation to the president. In his contribution, Brick seeks to problematise the condemnation of the American rapper's much-discussed support for Trump. Taking aim in particular at a selection of comment pieces that appeared in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Brick argues that neo-liberal media narratives such as *The Guardian's* codify West's 'otherness' as personal trauma and emotional pathology. Consequently, they negate the celebrity's political subjectivity and reaffirm the racialised subjectification that underpins contemporary neo-liberalism. West's troubling relation to Trump, in other words, reveals something far more problematic about neo-liberal media's relation to colour.

Finally, Aaron Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck analyse the political persona of Alex Jones, the American far-right radio show host and founder of the conspiracy site InfoWars.com. In the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections, Trump explicitly endorsed Jones; and Jones himself has claimed repeatedly that he is in regular contact with the president. Hyzen and Van den Bulck argue that Jones' persona should be understood as a populist celebrity. The authors chart how Jones has come to authentically personify right-wing, populist-conspiracism: he has succeed, through an act of 'affective performativity', at an apparent merger of his public and private persona, communicated in emotional, exaggerated terms. Jones' more recent involvement in pro-Trump rallies after the 2020 election demonstrates that the authors' analysis remains up-to-date.

Taken together, these four contributions demonstrate just how complex, layered and contradictory the relation between Trump of celebrity culture has become over the last four years. At the time of writing – to return to that worn-out phrase once more – the 45th president is still in office and appears quite unwilling, in fact, to leave the White House. Whatever the spectacle of Trump will bring us in 2021, it seems safe to stay that he will continue to grab our attention, as well as that of his fellow celebrities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Gaston Franssen is assistant professor of Literary Culture at the University of Amsterdam. He has published on celebrity in the *Journal of Dutch Studies*, *Celebrity Studies*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. In 2016, he co-edited *Celebrity Authorship and Afterlives in English and American Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan); in 2017, *Idolizing Authorship: Literary Celebrity and the Construction of Identity, 1800 to the Present* (Amsterdam University Press).

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