# Celebritizing Conflict

## How Ben Affleck Sells the Congo to Americans

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# Celebritizing Conflict: How Ben Affleck Sells the Congo to Americans

> It's fairly clear that in the modern age there is a currency to celebrity, or celebrity is a currency, really. I've discovered that you can spend it in a lot of ways, or you can squander it. You can be taxed, as well. I really started thinking long and hard about how to use that currency as long as I had it.
>
> —Ben Affleck on his work for Eastern Congo[1]

From serving as United Nations ambassadors to appearing as spokespersons for major NGO campaigns, global celebrities have become increasingly important in international development assistance. Acting as "aid celebrities," they are indelibly linked with humanitarian work and public engagement.[2] In the policy realm, celebrity endorsement may shift attention, shape decisions, and build or erode key alliances. Meanwhile, the figure of the celebrity offers an enticing lens to refract critical issues of power, influence, and voice within neoliberal north-south relations. This essay, using emerging literature on celebrities in north-south relations, analyzes the celebrity discourses and practices of the professional entertainer Ben Affleck and his engagement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in order to understand how celebrities intersect with and popularize representations of poverty, conflict, and development in Africa.

Ben Affleck is a famous actor and director who initiated his own advocacy and grant-making group, the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), in 2010. Soon after ECI's founding, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* highlighted ECI as "an example of a smart approach."[3] From glowing compliments from then secretary of state Hillary Clinton to invitations to testify in front of the U.S. Congress, Affleck and his organization have been the recipients of much praise. Affleck was even awarded an honorary doctorate from Brown University in 2013 for his "contributions as a humanitarian advocate," which were notably linked to his "working with and for the people of Eastern Congo."[4] Affleck's ability to use his celebrity status to quickly become a major player in humanitarian efforts in the DRC raises provocative questions around an emerging hierarchy and evolving norms for celebrity interventions. To what extent do celebrity discourses intersect with or differ from other representations of Africa? How do these celebrity humanitarians perform neoliberal development solutions?

Within the world of U.S. advocacy, the DRC's conflict and its humanitarian crises have received less attention than other star-studded efforts around Darfur, South Africa, and Uganda. Yet, as a lesser-known situation of utmost complexity, the DRC

has long suffered from colonialist and imperialist "imaginings" that downplay Western responsibility and sustain myths about the DRC's "new barbarism."[5] As a country, the DRC has been subject to various discursive constructions by an array of actors over time. As Kevin C. Dunn has argued, these framings rely on colonial images and racial stereotypes that privilege "Western definitions of state, sovereignty, and security."[6] More recently, the DRC has been framed by understandings aimed at a Western audience through a moral lens for a variety of diverse political and human rights purposes, as well as through economic and neoconservative lenses that regard Congo as a site of commerce or, alternatively, a potential hotbed of terrorism.[7] Into this context of deeply politicized transnational narratives about Congo comes a new actor, Ben Affleck, who takes up the promotion of Congo as a "cause" for a Western audience.

Previous work on transnational celebrity activism has investigated the Jubilee 2000 campaign, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and the Save Darfur movement. On the basis of these examples, Asteris Huliaras and Nikolaos Tsifakis hypothesize that "the success of [celebrities'] involvement in political lobbying seems to be dependent on the extent to which they work within networks and coalitions and elaborate pragmatic goals."[8] As amplifiers of particular causes or issues on the world stage, celebrities can at times promote the diffusion of ideas and norms that may shape policy solutions.[9] Affleck's engagement with the DRC offers insights into how the fundamental mechanisms of celebrity humanitarianism, which have both material and representational effects, remain unchanged.

In the following discussion, we recognize that long-term engaged DRC scholars are better suited to discussing contemporary social and historical perspectives on the DRC itself.[10] Thus, we do not challenge those perspectives and instead offer a critique of celebritized representations of the DRC. We employ a critical discourse analysis to examine how language and images are used in social practice. We conducted a systematic five-year Lexis-Nexis search of all references to Affleck and the Congo from January 2008 until December 2012; this search was supplemented by Google News and ECI's press page and more contemporary references to Affleck's work in DRC. We were primarily concerned with Affleck's public writing and speaking—op-eds, speeches, videos, press releases, and quotes cited in the media. Secondarily, we considered expert and observer reflections on Affleck's work. We investigated the connections among these texts and performances to the social context of celebrity humanitarianism. Our objective is to understand how Affleck uses his celebrity "currency" to brand himself as working *for* and *with* the people of DRC.

We begin by introducing the current literature around celebrities as new actors in north-south relations and celebritized representations of "development." Then we discuss, briefly, why celebrities are powerful as managers of affect and how this celebrity work has been used in constructions of an imagined "Africa." We argue that celebrity humanitarianism and its related narratives have repercussions in "real" politics, development, and interventions on the ground in DRC. In the section that follows, we move into our case study with a brief historical account of Affleck's work as a celebrity humanitarian in Africa. This leads into a discussion of Affleck's organization, ECI, which set the foundation for Affleck's work as a celebrity advocate in

formal U.S. politics. Next, we analyze Affleck's shift from celebrity advocacy to promoting cause-related marketing of chocolate bars to benefit the DRC. In our conclusion, we explore how the performance of celebrities as humanitarians may hold negative implications for local materialities (what can actually happen to people living in Eastern Congo) and for global representations of the power of global capitalism to solve its own problems through celebritized solutions.[11]

### Celebrities as New Development Actors

It is important to consider celebrities like Ben Affleck as relevant actors for articulating notions of "Africa" to the public because, as Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte argue, celebrities use affect to shape representations of development and constructions of north-south identities that are always co-constituted through imaginaries of "us" and "them," often with imperial, racist, and religious legacies.[12] The growing visibility and proliferation of celebrities in humanitarian causes has been dubbed *celebrity humanitarianism*.[13] Ilan Kapoor argues that this phenomenon "legitimates, and indeed promotes, neoliberal capitalism and global inequality."[14] Michael K. Goodman hypothesizes that "it is now through the globally-recognized megastar that the subaltern speaks."[15] Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot define "celebrity" as a state of superiority in a world where opinion is the defining instrument for measuring different orders of "greatness" (characterized by having a widespread reputation, being recognized in public, being visible, having success, being distinguished, and having opinion leaders, journalists, and media vouch for your status).[16] However, it is also important to situate celebrity within its own political economy, per Dan Brockington's definition, in which "celebrity describes sustained public appearances which 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."[17] While similar to other forms of charismatic leadership, celebrity differs in its dependence on social distance and its mediation through the media.[18] From the movie star on the famine stage to the "AIDS heroes" of China, the past decade has seen a proliferation of celebrities appearing in productions of north-south relations.[19]

Yet even as celebrities are now being considered as actors worthy of social science study, they are often analyzed as a symptom of an unsettling cultural shift. Critics argue that celebrities are problematic because they symbolize a shift "towards a culture that privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written and the rational."[20] Other scholars have argued that celebrities lack a mandate to become active in global politics, and they use narratives of "justice" without actually acknowledging inequalities that make celebrity possible.[21] Why, then, would celebrities be interesting to "real world" experts on north-south issues?

Celebrity has become a way of mediating between proximity and distance in the global as well as the specific (aid intervention, national culture, or organizational) context. A classic text on "the powerless elite" concludes that celebrities are "a transitional phenomenon that identifies the need of the general community for an avenue through which to discuss issues of morality . . . that are insufficiently or ineffectively handled in the rational sphere of evaluating political power elites."[22] As the paradigms

of "people we know so well" who are simultaneously "just like us" and "exemplary," celebrities have become proxy philanthropists, diplomats, executives, and healers: "what is needed to sustain the status quo is the manufacturing of the public's consent . . . and media-driven celebrity activism now leads the way."[23] In the sections that follow, we explore what Affleck's performances of development in DRC suggest about the possibilities for manufacturing the American public's consent on Africa.

### Affleck, Affect, and Africa

Central to the power of celebrity is the concept of "affect." A review of the increasing interest in affect in the fields of geography, cultural studies, and international political economy would extend beyond the scope of this essay.[24] Still, for our purposes, it is necessary to understand that the term is used in psychology to refer to the middle ground between cognition and behavior: the affective realm is connected to this chain of causality between something experienced and the formulation of a reaction to that experience. Celebrities are able to provide an expression of and an anchoring for affect in contemporary society, and they can do this in ways that ordinary individuals cannot. P. David Marshall constructs an analysis of celebrity that is based on existing studies of leadership, arguing that the representations of public figures from politicians to film stars hold much in common wherein a unified system of celebrity status is created.[25] "The celebrity system is a way in which the sphere of the irrational, emotional, personal, and affective is contained and negotiated in contemporary culture."[26] Chris Rojek summarizes the importance of this celebrity system saying: "Post-God celebrity is now one of the mainstays of organizing recognition and belonging in secular society."[27] Michael P. Marks and Zachary M. Fischer take this further into the political realm where rationality should have replaced myth with the loss of charismatic authority, yet citizens mold celebrities "out of bits and pieces of existent political ideology"; in the process, "the authority of celebrities thus derives from their ability, *through the force of their personality*, to translate political ideology *into the person* of themselves as legitimate rulers."[28]

Celebrity involvement has been linked to numerous issues and campaigns related to Africa. As Rita Abrahamsen argues, affect becomes increasingly important for understanding how Africa is represented:

> It alters the role of experts (and also the academic expert) within discussions of Africa. In the past, discourses of development and aid have constituted the economist, the statistician, the doctor, the social scientists, etc. as those authorized to speak authoritatively about the "problems" of Africa. Within a culture of consumption, the power of this kind of expert knowledge recedes in the face of appeals to emotions, often by pop stars and other celebrities. The celebrity is a different kind of expert, whose knowledge is not derived from numbers, deduction, or semi-structured interviews, but from "feeling the pain" of the poor and from offering an emotional connection to the subjects of development.[29]

With the emotional pull of affect coupled with deeper engagement with specific issues, celebrities have become expert collaborators in mediating the public's relationship with the continent of Africa.

That celebrities have begun to grow more self-conscious in their actions follows a history of celebrity humanitarianism that has attracted numerous critics. Representations of Affleck and the DRC sit within the context of how Africa has come to be understood in contemporary discourses. Achille Mbembe has argued that the real and the imaginary are interwoven in the category of "Africa."[30] James Ferguson takes this further by suggesting that "Africa" has a particular place in "globalization"—a "place" understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories.[31] The "forcefully imposed position in the contemporary world—is easily visible if we notice how fantasies of a categorical 'Africa' (normally, 'Sub-Saharan' or 'black' Africa) and 'real' political-economic processes on the continent are interrelated."[32] It is in the "reductive repetition" that African underdevelopment becomes popularized.[33] However, some representatives of "Africa" are given more media time, more public attention, and hold more affective power in constructing an imagined public consensus over the meanings of development in Africa. Ben Affleck is one of these representatives, and his engagement demonstrates how his affective power also benefits other experts, who become co-creators of celebritized representations of Africa.

### Celebrity Humanitarians and Narrative Repercussions in DRC

If the celebritized performances by Ben Affleck had no real link to the lives of the people living in the DRC, then the critique would be limited to how such performances affect Western donors in a context of global capitalism. However, the popularization of the DRC has coalesced around simple messages of "how you can help save Congo."[34] The discourses and representations that drive international engagements in the DRC have been summarized and analyzed by Séverine Autesserre.[35] She finds that intervention narratives on the DRC have come to narrowly focus on a single, "primary cause of the violence, the illegal exploitation of resources; a main consequence, sexual abuse against women and girls; and a central solution, reconstructing state authority."[36] She argues that these efforts toward peace building and democracy in DRC, with a focus on aid and state reform, have done more harm than good, noting that narratives become more dominant and thus more likely to influence action "when they suggest a simple solution; and when they can latch on to pre-existing narratives."[37] We add that narratives are also likely to become dominant when they are amplified and reinforced by a celebrity humanitarian.

In the case of the DRC, the more awareness has been raised about the complexity of the problem, the more the general public has perceived it to be intractable. David Eaton uses the example of Congo as a postcolonial state to debate the production of knowledge and action driving interventions and reform. He implies that "within a world much larger and less knowable than ourselves we create a flawed and partial account."[38] But it is not just the Western public that "needs" simplified discourses; humanitarian workers on the ground in the DRC also point out the poor quality of available information on the conflict, the blurred lines between victims and perpetrators, the lack of preparation time, poor quality relationships between international and Congolese counterparts, inaccessibility of unstable areas, and an inability to understand the local languages.[39] While counternarratives are always present, they are rarely heard in ways or contexts that allow them to support contestation of the

dominant frames. Thus, the dominant, celebritized narratives on the DRC can have effects on the actual workings of local humanitarian work and external engagement.

### Affleck's History as a Celebrity Humanitarian in Africa

Since 2006, Ben Affleck's name and celebrity presence have been linked to over a dozen domestic and international charities and NGOs including Feeding America, Robin Hood, UNHCR, and Vital Voices.[40] There is no doubt that his star presence increased the coffers for many of these causes, but Affleck has also made statements suggesting that fundraising for issues in Africa is insufficient. In 2008, while attending an event staged by OneXOne, a Canadian charity that since 2005 has raised money for poor children around the world, Affleck remarked that such efforts blinded the public to local efforts of people to confront their own problems.[41] To incubate local initiatives and avoid a culture of dependence, Affleck has shifted his engagement over time from simply "asking for donations" to lobbying for increased foreign aid, "engaging philanthropists," "investment," and selling brand aid products like chocolate bars.[42]

Affleck reflected on the way that celebrity amplification can promote distorted images of Africa:

> I think sometimes asking for donations gets out the message disproportionately that this is a place just full of misery and awfulness and suffering and it does a disservice in a way to 800 million people on a continent . . . I meet them all the time and they go, "Why is it that all of you in North America think we're lying around with flies in our eyes and dying on the floor?" And you feel a little bit ashamed because, you're right, I don't want to perpetuate that.[43]

To be taken seriously as humanitarians, celebrities must be perceived as authentic, knowledgeable, and genuinely invested in the causes they promote. In 2008, Affleck began to travel to the DRC and invited ABC News to follow him on his third trip. During media conferences to promote the ABC News piece, Affleck exhibited awareness of his potential power as a celebrity: "I want to try to bring people along to learn and if they might not tune into this unless there was some celebrity involved in it, either because they're interested in the celebrity or because they want to see the celebrity kind of make a fool of himself, then so be it."[44]

Affleck also wrote an essay for the ABC News website that framed his celebrity work in the DRC and his role in representing others. He outlined his trips to the country as preparation for his lobbying efforts:

> I view this as a long and ongoing learning experience to educate myself before making any attempt to advocate or "speak out." My plan has been to explore, watch, listen and find those doing the best work with and on behalf of the people of the DRC, in an effort to give exposure to voices which might not otherwise be heard. In short, I want to listen before speaking and learn before taking action.[45]

Affleck reflects explicitly about the fundamental position of the celebrity do-gooder: it is because he is a celebrity that he attracts public attention to DRC, yet his success as a celebrity humanitarian involves shifting the focus toward those who "work on

behalf of the people." As a result, there is a reciprocity involved in which "voices which might otherwise not be heard" will be amplified by the celebrity, and Affleck will in turn become legitimized by northern audiences on behalf of those voices. He acknowledges that reciprocity when he says:

> It makes sense to be skeptical about celebrity activism. There is always the suspicion that involvement with a cause may be doing more good for the spokesman than he or she is doing for the cause. I welcome any questions about me and my involvement, but I hope you can separate whatever reservations you may have from what is unimpeachably important about this segment: the plight of eastern Congo.[46]

Assuming the role of the "student" or novice, Affleck took steps to educate himself through reading and meeting with grassroots organizations in Congo. Affleck would later promote his extensive links to Congo-related organizations, naming a number of local groups and international organizations. His self-reflective demeanor and visibly studious work can also be understood as performing authenticity, a mechanism of building credibility for celebrity humanitarianism. But beyond his performances for media consumption, Affleck explains at length his personal narrative and decision-making processes.

Affleck states that his choice of the Congo as a site of activity was motivated by the extensive attention given to the situation in Darfur. He explains, "I thought a lot of people are advocating on Darfur. I'd just be a very small log on a big fire. I started getting interested in Congo and I thought, this is a place where I can have a really big impact."[47] Affleck was not modest about the potential effect of his agency in choosing Congo as a target for his humanitarian actions. For him, "being here is primarily to bring attention to the fact that there's a real lack of [aid agencies] here, a real lack of money."[48] Given that the other major humanitarian "need" areas were already claimed by celebrities, Affleck was, of course, simultaneously carving out space for himself while reiterating stereotypical colonial visions of the Congo in which problems are solved, rather than created, by increasing interventions of global capital.[49]

Affleck released a short commercial for UNHCR, highlighting the international organization's work in Congo, as part of their fundraising efforts for a "Give Them Shelter" campaign.[50] His cachet brought in additional celebrity weight when he secured rights to Mick Jagger's song "Gimme Shelter" as the soundtrack. "We made the film in order to focus attention on the humanitarian crisis in the DRC at a time when too much of the world is indifferent or looking the other way," Affleck said at the film debut at UN Headquarters in New York. "The suffering and loss we've all seen first-hand is staggering—it is beyond belief."[51] Again, the celebrity humanitarian as witness is emphasized to provide credibility for an international humanitarian organization. "The Rolling Stones are very happy to contribute to 'Gimme Shelter' in support of Ben's efforts to raise the profile of the conflict in the Congo," Jagger said of the film.[52]

Affleck also solicited the expertise of major players at the elite level of advocacy and grant making. In addition to numerous trips in the company of photographers, he engaged the services of williamsworks, a firm that advises donors and nonprofit

organizations. Other clients include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CARE, Nike Foundation, and the William J. Clinton Foundation.[53] With williamsworks' guidance on strategic positioning, Affleck conceived of the Eastern Congo Initiative as a vehicle to marshal his celebrity to raise awareness of the DRC in the United States and also to support local development work done by grassroots organizations in Eastern Congo.[54] Moreover, Affleck wanted to lobby the United States for greater attention to the region but recognized he needed "to back up his advocacy work with real insights."[55] His process also constructs the complex conflicts in the DRC as a realm for intervention through management by international, professional consultancy firms.

### ECI and Local Development

In March 2010, Affleck formally launched Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), which touts itself as "the first U.S. based advocacy and grant-making initiative wholly focused on working with and for the people of eastern Congo."[56] With the ECI, Affleck gained a prominent platform, situated in the development field, to craft a cogent narrative of Congo, build an audience, attract media attention, and exert influence within human rights circles. As the founder and leading spokesperson for ECI, Affleck serves as both celebrity humanitarian and expert, speaking on behalf of Congo for a wider public through op-eds, media appearances, and speeches. The ECI website, research pieces, videos, and Affleck's spoken and written discourses provide the key texts that we analyze to see how Affleck and ECI have constructed a neoliberal development vision of the DRC.

In its literature, ECI highlights "local, community-based approaches [as] the key to creating a successful society in eastern Congo." The genesis of the organization is explained in a four-minute video titled *An Animated History of Eastern Congo Initiative, or Ben Affleck on the Meaning of Life*.[57] In this film, a cartoon of Affleck explains how despite his immense success, he had no idea about what his values were or what his contribution to the world could be until he read about five million deaths in Congo and began to reflect on the international community's inaction. As a celebrity, he could "shine a spotlight on Congo." An animation of an aged Affleck sitting on a park bench looking out over Congo and the globe, reflecting on his life, concludes, "This is important work. But it's also very rewarding . . . for me." This future version of Affleck seems to suggest that the American spectator is ever central in the celebritized representations of developing DRC. Affleck's celebrity humanitarian genesis story is not powerful because it is unique or innovative but because it is so common. In the words of Kathryn Mathers, writing about Nicholas Kristof, "This . . . is the story of the lone, often white, often American traveler who stumbles onto a scene of devastating and disturbing poverty somewhere in the underdeveloped/third/poverty-stricken world and returns home to try and do something to help."[58] In Affleck's intervention, celebrity embodies "our" desire to do good and assumes the consent of a "responsibilized" citizenry of Congolese whose continued "partnership" in such initiatives endorses the utility of our good intentions.

ECI's brand advantage is that of supporting and partnering with local development efforts on the ground, in contrast to other larger advocacy organizations

Figure 1. Ben Affleck attends U.S. House of Representatives hearing on Republic of Congo, March 8, 2011. Photo by Kaeun Yu, courtesy Flicker Commons.

focused on Africa. At a high-level event in Washington, D.C., to discuss child survival, Affleck described how "ECI is driven by the Congolese and their resilience and determination on the path toward progress. It's an inspiring thing to see, and it's an inspiring thing to be part of."[59] His claims to work *with* and *for* the Congolese respond to critiques of celebrity distance while underscoring Congolese consent. In a departure from older ideas of aid dependency, Affleck stresses the notion of collaboration; the ECI website even highlights these specific Congolese organizations as "project partners." ECI also engages in advocacy centered on driving public policy change in the United States. At the end of 2010, ECI released its first white paper, "Strengthening United States Foreign Policy in the Democratic Republic of Congo," a signal that the organization was making serious overtures to policymakers.[60] Affleck has also succeeded in making contact with and lobbying various members of Congress and various U.S. agencies.

With USAID, ECI conducted a landscape analysis of community-based organizations. The report is available as an online, searchable database that "gives policy leaders, investors, and analysts much-needed insight into the workings and nature of work being done to create a sustainable and successful society in eastern Congo."[61] It provided interesting partnership and branding opportunities for USAID, whose press release of the landscape analysis emphasized its abilities to link donors and philanthropists to local DRC organizations "stuck at the bottom of the funding chain."[62] The report also provided strategic communications by an award-winning film star on behalf of a perennially unpopular U.S. government organization: USAID has video links to Affleck introducing ECI, the landscape analysis, and prominent Congolese NGOs with their directors.[63] They legitimize the work of the celebrity humanitarian and emphasize collaborations with ECI:

> "Through the database and the landscape analysis, USAID and ECI have laid the groundwork for augmenting foreign assistance in Eastern Congo," said USAID's Global Partnerships Division Director Christopher Jurgens. "Serving as a model of strategic investment in the region, the partnership's assessment will shape future engagement and elevate awareness and commitment to the region within international development and donor communities." Together, the two organizations seek to build a robust development alliance that channels the support of public entities, philanthropists, private sector companies and foundations to community-based organizations working on the ground in Eastern Congo.[64]

The neoliberal development vision promoted by Affleck relies on private-public partnerships with a variety of actors, including USAID, businesses, and philanthropists, in support of community-based organizations working with Congolese.

### Buying into Ben Affleck's Congo

"Of all places, why Congo?" asks the narrator of the four-minute CBS news video introducing the Theo Chocolate Bar made from 100 percent DRC-sourced fair trade cocoa.[65] Joe Whinney, founder and CEO of Theo Chocolate, responds with a smile, saying, "Well, it was really Ben Affleck's fault." The voice-over says, "Yes, *that* Ben Affleck," as the film shows Whinney educating Affleck as they handle raw cacao beans, while promoting an image of the *Argo*-look Affleck, reproduced as part of the chocolate maker's media kit.[66] The narrative continues: "In 2009 Affleck started a charity called Eastern Congo Initiative to spur economic development in this war-torn region. Five million people have died here due to decades of conflict." The scene of the video shifts to Affleck, interviewed in front of a propeller plane: "As I was reading, and I just sort of stumbled onto some of these statistics and I was struck, not only by the numbers, but by the fact that, you know, I hadn't heard about it." The video moves to a low-tech meeting room in the DRC full of Congolese listening to a white female presenter. The narrator explains: "So Affleck decided to use his celebrity as a sort of currency to attract investment" (the camera shows Affleck listening intently, seated next to two middle-aged, very casually dressed, white men).

The camera then follows this group of Americans and Congolese guides down a footpath, past a Congolese soldier with a rifle in hand, to a group of cacao trees. "[Affleck] led a small group of philanthropists protected by armed guards through a jungle where cacao trees thrive and farmers struggle." The film continues with a brief explanation of how to remove cacao beans from the pods—a prelude to the final message by Affleck. Dressed in a T-shirt, his hair windblown, and rural Congo in the background, Affleck explains neoliberal development: "We have brought these people together. They're selling to a chocolate company in the United States . . . those markets have been completely closed off to them in the past. It's not just aid, it's investment." Affleck slaps his hand to emphasize the point. Esco Kivu, the source of cacao for this chocolate-based development vision, is a private company responsible for the extension and support of 1,400 small farmers in Watalinga and has been operating in Eastern Congo since 1970.[67] However, why U.S. markets have been


Figure 2. Congo chocolate bars, September 26, 2013. Photo by Headlines and Heroes, courtesy Flicker Commons.

"closed off" to DRC suppliers is not part of the discussion. Privatized development in which security is paramount and engagement with global markets is the mechanism for success is at the core of Affleck's celebrity humanitarian representations.

The video scene shifts to show camouflaged soldiers, and the politics of military conflict are reintroduced with the narration, "Investment in an area not far from where rebels recently took over a regional capital. But cacao is known as a militia-resistant crop. The beans are not usually stolen by rebels because they are worthless without all the processing to turn them into chocolate."[68] This imaginary allows viewers to remove their chocolate bar from the politics of poverty and violent conflict that their purchase is meant to ameliorate. It is important that cacao is "militia-resistant" so as to deflect any possible questions over whether contributing capital to people in conflict risks supporting the conflict itself. Away from the violent masculinity of an unexplained "Africa," American consumers can be alone with Ben Affleck, "good" business, and deserving Congolese women farmers, for whom chocolate is a main source of income.

After Whinney comments on how difficult but worthwhile it is to conduct business in DRC, two rural Congolese women are shown from a side view as he hands them a small piece (of what we assume is the five-dollar "Congo bar" brought over from Seattle): "You've never tasted chocolate?" he asks, in a tone that implies confirmation of facts already known. "What do you think?" "It's OK," says one of the women, laughing. "Just OK?" laughs Whinney, and the film ends. When we consulted it, the Theo Chocolate website featured a similar photographic image with the caption "Joe sharing cacao with Congolese farmers," in which five women and three small children stand smiling behind a relaxed and casually clad Whinney, an electronic device clipped to his back pocket, who appears to be handing out chocolate.. Critical viewers may question whose cacao is actually being shared. How can Joe, on a Congolese cacao farm, "share" cacao that, we are led to believe, is farmed on small plots for export to the United States, the profit of which will remain with the women? Is it not the Congolese farmers' cacao to begin with? And so shouldn't these women in fact be "sharing" with Joe? However, in this visual utopia, everyone is relaxed and sharing the fruits of successful trade relations: men and women,

Americans and Congolese, rich and poor, farmers and CEOs. There are notably no Congolese men to disrupt the imaginary of a single well-intentioned actor with technology and know-how who can train and trade away the repercussions of a complex history in three steps simple enough to fit on a chocolate label: act, heal rebuild. Susan Sontag reminds us of the complicity involved in such representations: "The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the far-away sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power."[69]

The two "Congo Bars" ("Pili Pili Chili" and "Vanilla Nib") are made in Seattle with 100 percent of their cocoa sourced from the DRC; they are wrapped in warm orange and yellow labels with a neo-primitive drawing of a dancing lion under the heading "Act, Heal, Rebuild" and the ECI logo. The Congo Bars are sold online via the Theo website and in Whole Foods stores in the United States for $4.99 (a dollar more than the other ethical Theo bars). According to the Theo web site, "A portion of proceeds are donated to ECI, with the potential to positively impact more than 20,000 people living in Eastern Congo."[70] As with most brand aid initiatives, the actual details on how much funding is generated through the cause-related marketing of these products is vague and typically relates to a donation determined after profit is made.

A section of the website titled "Why Congo, Why Cocoa, Why Now" explains how decades of political violence and exploitation, global and local, in DRC can be converted into opportunities for "partnership" and caring: "Violence, poverty, and disease in the DRC have claimed the lives of over 5 million men, women, and children. . . . Theo and ECI recognized an opportunity to help the region emerge from crisis by joining forces with local farmers to cultivate cocoa.."[71] In this vision of development, Eastern Congo is "emerging" from its imagined depths of inexplicable oppression (thus there is no need to explain it). Notably, it is also emerging toward expanding market cooperation with the United States (and not toward Asia, where much of Africa is now expanding its markets). This transformation away from "violence, poverty and disease" is done without radically restructuring the economy—"local farmers" remain both "local" and "farmers"; they do not migrate to urban spaces nor diversify into nonfarm activity. In short, the neoliberal development vision is one that keeps conflict, "underdevelopment" and ultimately Congo, it its "place" in the hierarchy of transnational relations.[72]

During his television promotions for his Oscar-award winning film *Argo*, Affleck had a little media time to promote the Congo Bars. The brief sound bites he gave are similar to the one from ABC News below. The clip begins with an image of the two bars and Affleck saying:

> I've started this organization called the Eastern Congo Initiative; we fund grassroots organizations in the Eastern Congo which is as you know is a terribly, [host interjects, "So much violence"] war-torn place and we work with these folks at Greenhouse to bring their choco . . . , uh, their cocoa up to the level of international standards and we hook them up with Theo Chocolates and we have a

> Congo chocolate bar that's goin' on sale. You can get it on the Internet, it'll be at Whole Foods and uh, and so, uh, you can have a beautiful chocolate meal and also help make the world a better place. ["Fantastic," says the host, shifting the conversation to Affleck's wife and his desire for a fourth child].[73]

Here we reproduce the dialogue in its entirety because, simply, nothing more is said about the DRC. In the mainstream U.S. media attention given to Affleck, the DRC is consistently contextualized as the place where a young rebel, spurred toward repentance through the experience of fatherhood, found his redemption. DRC takes the stereotypical place in "Africa" as analyzed by Kathryn Mathers, a continent that is originally defined by its poverty but then becomes exemplary as a story of the resilience of human spirit, and particularly an emptied landscape where Americans can find ways to do good.[74] The complexity of the DRC's violent history is thus "solved" by the neoliberal intervention of a brand aid campaign around chocolate. For example, on an episode of *Nightline* from September 2012, the television host Bill Weir asks Affleck, "How goes that fight? Are you still engaged there?" and Affleck, reaching down to pull the candy on screen, replies, "It goes great. In fact, I wanted to give you guys some of our Congo Bars."[75]

Affleck repeats the short summary of ECI given in the ABC News interview, but interestingly, in this segment, the next scene shows Hillary Clinton at a podium labeled Child Survival Call To Action, announcing "Ben Affleck" and walking over to hug him on stage. The narration explains, "While he still lobbies the U.S. government to put diplomatic pressure on Congo to help their people, the Democrat is not campaigning as he did in election years past." Affleck explains, "Yeah, I got less interested in it, the more I was around it, the more I saw, like, it was about money, how much is about raising money, and if you're a surrogate, you're there to help raise money and if you're not, you watch what the campaigns are doing to raise money and I've been part of it. I've participated in it, but it just depresses me and it makes . . . it's not interesting and it doesn't reflect well on our democracy."[76] In this mainstream American news clip, Ben Affleck is featured as embodying a particular kind of neoliberal politics in which "action" is taken by individuals (not states, lobbying groups, or parties) who enact their political values for issues like supporting Congo through the marketplace. His rhetoric also skillfully shifts the emphasis from the formal politics of diplomacy and campaigns to the personal politics of feelings and consumption. Buying a chocolate bar becomes the mechanism for good politics, while political campaigning is explicitly articulated by Affleck as being "just about money."

## Conclusions

The fight in Congo goes great, have a candy bar, because politics is too tainted by big money to be worthwhile. Ben Affleck's engagement with DRC reflects a mediatized celebrity humanitarianism in which a bitter war is replaced by sweet chocolate from afar. "Big money" formal politics is replaced by individuals helping individuals through investment, trade, and consumption. In this essay, we have reviewed the engagement of the celebrity humanitarian Ben Affleck as an activist for U.S. interests in the DRC. This work has taken on various forms over time, from televised

witnessing to partnering with USAID, from bipartisan political lobbying to the promotion of brand aid "Congo Bars." Our analysis suggests that Affleck's affective representations of the DRC may have implications for these local materialities and for the expansion of neoliberal global capitalism. As we describe above, international interventions in areas of security and development have real effects on the ground in DRC, and these interventions are shaped by the discursive constructions of the problem and the solution, even by celebrity humanitarians.

Affleck's narrative is that of celebrity humanitarianism. It combines photogenic, authentic, well-meaning film star markets with compelling stories that feature the right mix of strangers suffering from remediable injustice along with an equally important grassroots self-reliance. For example, at the Global Philanthropy Forum in Redwood City, California, Affleck touched on the complexity of governing in the DRC:

> The larger challenges of working in a failed state are real and daunting and have kept away experienced, smart donors. It's a chicken and egg thing. We are not going to remedy problems if we don't get involved.[77]

Affleck's Eastern Congo Initiative has attracted some important benefactors, among them Google; Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen; Cindy Hensley McCain; and the foundation Humanity United, which is led by Pam Omidyar, wife of the founder of eBay.[78] At the Global Philanthropy Forum, "Affleck ended on a upbeat note: he brought along with him the music group Maisha Soul, comprised of four brothers—the youngest of whom, named Innocent (age 13), won the Congo's equivalent of American Idol."[79] Described by Dan Brockington as the "celebrity-charity-corporate complex" these relationships work because of importance of publicity, but also because of the "personal pleasure that the company of the famous affords."[80] The neoliberal narrative of development for the DRC involves a personalization of politics through the image of the celebrity. In this utopia, the pleasures of consuming African culture and chocolate transcend partisan political barriers in the United States. However, the images of rich philanthropists saving violent and misconnected Africans from themselves are not easily reconciled with Ben Affleck's reliance on the self-reliant and resilient grassroots communities in Eastern Congo.

Despite Affleck's genuine efforts and good intentions, the celebritization of the DRC through his work has negative consequences for power, influence, and voice. Ilan Kapoor's ideology critique of celebrity humanitarianism summarizes:

> The problem with moral spectacle is precisely that it is less concerned with analysis and understanding than with taking sides and issuing calls to action . . . The focus on the outwardly visible and the spectacular, on special effects and sound-bytes, avoids layered, substantive, and media-unfriendly investigation . . . What is left out of the NGO/media stories are the un-photogenic details, the "boring" particulars of the daily grind of people's lives, the recurring patterns of alienation and marginalization.[81]

But it is not just the celebrity and his or her apparatus that is responsible for celebritized humanitarian interventions. The audience, Kapoor argues, "is deeply

implicated, since we help sustain the ideological fantasy. Our beliefs in the 'good works' of celebrities and our often unquestioned trust in their authority to influence public policy or promote neoliberal solutions—all help propagate the political economy of celebrity culture."[82] As a recent critique of neoliberalism succinctly stated: "Consumerist activism, development discourse, and pink-ribbon feminism all partake of the liberal fallacy that good will and cooperation and compromise will suffice to fix the intractable problems of poverty and inequality—problems that are imagined to be static and given, as if outside the realm of history and politics."[83] The narrative of the DRC, manufactured by a celebrity humanitarian such as Ben Affleck, reinforces rather than contests this ideological bias toward neoliberal solutions delivered by Western governments and publics.

Popular representations of global helping are not delinked from traditional international development representations of the need to intervene and save the lives of the worthy but ineffective citizens of "Africa."[84] While advocates for celebrity humanitarianism laud the opportunities provided by celebrities for awareness raising and bringing official attention to problems, the lack of direct diplomatic intervention by countries like the United States is unlikely to have resulted from a knowledge gap or public pressure. More awareness has been created around the internal and external complexity that underlies the continuation of conflicts that are not smoothly reduced to geographical scope, political governance, or material struggles in DRC. However, it is far more likely that the policies of implementing humanitarian ideals will continue to be developed in ways that exclude from the formal political processes states that are not good for world order.[85] Affleck's discourses, using the rhetoric of "failed states" and "militia-proof" crops, reinforce the well-worn trope of Africa as a place in need of humanitarian help. The narrative Affleck spins suggests that American citizens would prefer to resort to celebritized witnessing tours, concentrating on grassroots organizations and the consumption of "helping" chocolate—and not on politics, which we are led to believe is impenetrable and corrupt in the DRC and only about money in the United States. This representation depoliticizes humanitarianism and presents it as the only alternative for confronting the root causes of Africa's underdevelopment.

## NOTES

1. David Bauder, "Ben Affleck Heads to Congo as 'Nightline' Correspondent," *Huffington Post*, June 25, 2008.

2. See, for example, Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Lilie Chouliaraki, "The Theatricality of Humanitarianism: A Critique of Celebrity Advocacy," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–21; Ilan Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism: Ideology of Global Charity* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Joel Pruce, "The Spectacle of Suffering and Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia," in *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering*, ed. Tristan Anne Borer (London: Zed Books, 2012).

3. Caroline Preston, "Behind a Celebrity's Bid to Help Eastern Congo," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 20, 2011.

4. Bryanna Capadona, "Ben Affleck Receives Honorary Doctorate Degree from Brown University," *Boston Magazine*, May 27, 2013.

5. Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

6. "Images that shape Western understandings of Congo are numerous and come from such sources as *Heart of Darkness*; Tarzan; *National Geographic*; media reports on the Ebola virus, AIDS, famine, or continuing 'tribal' violence; and countless cinematic and fictional portrayals of the Congo and its inhabitants." Ibid., 5.

7. Eleni Coundouriotis, "Congo Cases: The Stories of Human Rights History," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 133–53; Theodore Trefon, *Congo Masquerade: The Political Culture of Aid Inefficiency and Reform Failure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

8. Asteris Huliaras and Nikolaos Tsifakis, "Bringing the Individuals Back In? Celebrities as Transnational Activists," in *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics*, ed. Liza Tsaliki et al. (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), 40.

9. Alexandra Cosima Budabin, "Celebrities as Norm Entrepreneurs in International Politics: Mia Farrow and the 'Genocide Olympics' Campaign," *Celebrity Studies* 6, no. 4 (2015): 399–413.

10. See, for example, Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Janet MacGaffey, *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling and Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996–2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Thomas Turner, *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth, and Reality* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

11. See Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*.

12. Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, "New Actors and Alliances in Development," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2014): 1–21. See, for example, J. S. Crush, *Power of Development* (London: Routledge, 1995); Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*; Graham Harrison, "Images and Representations of Africa Old, New and Beyond," *Review of African Political Economy* 39, no. 131, Brand Africa: Multiple Transitions in Global Capitalism (2012): 135–50; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); Anthony Bebbington and Uma Kothari, "Transnational Development Networks," *Environment and Planning A* 38, no. 5 (May 2006): 849–66; Richey and Ponte, *Brand Aid*; Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Open University, 1992).

13. Lisa Ann Richey, ed., *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations: Politics, Place and Power* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).

14. Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*, 1.

15. Michael K. Goodman, "The Mirror of Consumption: Celebritization, Developmental Consumption and the Shifting Cultural Politics of Fair Trade," *Geoforum* 41, no. 1 (2010): 105.

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26. Ibid., 72–73.

27. Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 58.

28. Marks and Fischer, "The King's New Bodies," 383 (emphasis in original).

29. Rita Abrahamsen, "Africa in a Global Political Economy of Symbolic Goods," *Review of African Political Economy* 39, no. 131 (March 2012): 141.

30. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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35. See Séverine Autesserre, "Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences," *African Affairs* 111, no. 443 (April 2012): 202–22; Trefon, *Congo Masquerade*.

36. Autesserre, "Dangerous Tales," 3.

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56. See Eastern Congo Initiative website, http://www.easterncongo.org/ (accessed January 21, 2013).

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67. Theo Chocolate, "Our Cocoa Beans," accessed January 30, 2014, https://www.theochocolate.com/our-product-info/our-cocoa-beans.

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80. Dan Brockington, "The Production and Construction of Celebrity Advocacy in International Development," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2014): 102.

81. Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*, 96.

82. Ibid., 115.

83. Jason Hickel, "Liberalism and the Politics of Occupy Wall Street," *Anthropology of This Century* 4 (May 2012), accessed November 26, 2012, http://aotcpress.com/articles/liberalism-politics-occupy-wall-street/.

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