

The Donald, FLOTUS, and the Gendered Labors of Celebrity Politics at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Picador, 2018), 327 pp.

Omarosa Manigault Newman, *Unhinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House* (New York: Gallery Books, 2018), 334 pp.

Mary Jordan, *The Art of Her Deal: The Untold Story of Melania Trump* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 341 pp.

Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 426 pp.

When I started thinking about this review essay, I wondered how to approach the political culture of the United States, its celebrity spectacles, and the cultures of affect related to it. But I am not alone in my puzzlement, it seems. In his introduction to *Trump's America*, Liam Kennedy evokes the sense of dislocation, overstimulation, and collective trauma related to the present, and the “deceptions [...] endorsed as an alternative reality” by Trump himself (1-2). Carlos Lozada, a book critic and a self-professed citizen reader (7), seeks to find out “how we thought here” (1). Considering the mind warp of “alternative facts,” Elena Matala de Mazza reminds us that the deployment of what Michel de Montaigne called “fictions légitimes” (qtd. in Mattala de Mazza 121-22) are longstanding technologies of governance and served the potentates’ legitimate agendas of conserving power and trust. Both Donald Trump and Barack Obama run on a kind of celebrity politics that capitalizes on “style” and “symbolism,” features frequently overlooked in political communication (Street 370). Obama advocates for change through a string of memoirs, with the most recent 750-page tome *A Promised Land* published as part one (!) of his legacy-building machine. Trump, as Georg Seeßlen has argued, amalgamates the roles of popstar, folk hero, and politician. Meanwhile, both Michelle Obama and Melania Trump have gained cult status in catering to their husband’s presidential mystique. Hence, the books discussed here illustrate how gendered governance is performed in the United States nowadays. They canvas competing narratives of governance—as business or as sentimental work and what I tentatively call the gendered labors of celebrity politics.

Michael Wolff’s *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (2018) kicked off a genre of Trump literature: the “chaos chronicles” (Lozada 170). These books, capped off most recently with Bob Woodward’s *Rage* (2020), offer insider reports of the hair-raising incompetence and madness of the guy on top, framing him as “Trump the mobster; the toddler; the TV star” (Lozada 184). Key to this distinct reportage is the White, masculinist positioning of the professional author himself, who provides eyewitness accounts while also living to tell the tale to a global audience projected as a corrective: Opposite the madness, rage, fire, and fury in the White House, the outside epitomizes a sanctuary of order, reason, and calm.

Authors of chaos chronicles turn to different narrative frameworks to control their material. Wolff’s ordering framework of choice is theater culture. And above the *theatrum mundi*, Stephen Bannon looms as “auteur of the presidency” (7), embellished with pompous chapter titles such as “Bannon Agonistes” or “Bannon Redux.” Wolff’s narrator persona fuses with Bannon through inte-

rior focalization and free indirect speech—including the masculinist truncated brouhaha replete with “contests” (302), “mortal competitions” (53), and the framing of governance as combat. Wolff even gives Bannon the last word: “It’s going to be wild as shit” (310). Judging from the epilogue, it was also Bannon who pointed Wolff to theater when he said the Trump presidency “ma[de] Shakespeare look like Dr. Seuss” (308)—a misconstrual of the Shakespearean tragic messenger as accomplice. *Fire and Fury’s* revelation of the constant escalation emanating from the Trump White House is tarnished by Wolff’s sensationalist antics: Wolff is so busy with his own oeuvre (he calls his book a “seismic political event” [315]) and with Bannon that he overlooks Trump. *Fire and Fury* simply quotes insiders’ tautological redundancies (“He’s Donald” [7], “Trump is Trump” [8], “he was what he was” [20]).

Omarosa Manigault Newman’s *Unhinged: An Insider’s Account of the White House* (2018) is a remarkable example of the chaos chronicles: It capitalizes on the author’s unique intersectional view as a Black woman, and it refuses to resort to tautology: “They thought Trump was being Trump, off the cuff. But I knew something wasn’t right” (246). Instead, Omarosa gestures at care work and responsibility to save the country when she warns about Trump being “physically ill” and having “cognitive issues” (311, 313). Where Wolff sucks up to Bannon, Omarosa embarks on “Trump studies” (29) to become “the lady version of Trump” (26). Hence, *Unhinged* is also more Trumpist than other tell-all books, since Omarosa (as she calls herself to “reinforce the name of [her] brand” [28]) is a TV celebrity and pastoral minister who became Trump’s “director of African American Outreach” (113). The author of *The Bitch Switch: Knowing When to Turn It On and Off* (2008) tells her readers early on, “Believe me, I am the ultimate survivor” (xxiv) and, in best tall-tale manner, compares her birth to the arrival of a Tornado (4).

Unhinged thus uses Trumpist *braggadocio* to pep up the narrative the author hammers home with sheer repetition: that she had a “blind spot” (e.g., xxii, 74, 75, 76, 100) when it came to Trump’s racism; that she was the African American community’s “only voice” (xxxii), but had her hand slapped away when she tried to help (114, 240, 263); that Trump is the central personality of the sectarian “cult” that is “Trumpworld” (xxvi, 88, 319), which she had been trying to leave (290, 293, 295); that she is now “free” (xviii, 319, 320, 322, 330) and sees clearly that “Trump is unhinged [...], a racist, a bigot, and a misogynist” (xxviii). Her breaking point is Trump’s racism and her own agency in defining her Black womanhood.

She tags “strong” female role models who have a “voice,” including Hillary Clinton, and wrestles with controlling images: “I was going for strong black woman, not angry black woman. There is a *big* difference.” (33; emphasis in original). For all the repetitions, the key scene plays out in a mute moment of intimate surveillance: in the 2016 election, Omarosa, a registered Democrat, fills out her absentee ballot aboard “Trump Force One” and shows Trump she voted for him. He looks pensively at the ballot, and then “[h]e saw me looking at him looking at the ballot” (153). As citizen and private person, Omarosa becomes co-opted and complicit: She signs up because she “wanted to win” (153). In *Unhinged*, Omarosa seeks to ingratiate herself with her readership by moving from the tall tale to her disentanglement from Trump. In the end, she turns to the ritual invocation of national resilience: “Right now, I believe we are in a deep valley, and I acknowledge my role in our being here. I also have faith that we will march upward, and out of it, very soon” (328–29). Right after being fired, she joined *Celebrity Big Brother* for more media hits about politics, “the biggest business of them all” (20).

Opposite Omarosa's self-puffery as "lady version" of Donald Trump, First Lady Melania appears deflated and evasive. When I first read Mary Jordan's *The Art of Her Deal: The Untold Story of Melania Trump* (2020), I was curious to see Jordan unlock Melania Trump's FLOTUS persona and her "work[s] at being mysterious" (6)—Jordan lists non-disclosure arrangements, control on Melania's digital footprint, and threats from the Trump camp (27). Already on the campaign trail, this mystery inspired literary experiments such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Arrangements" (2016), and after the election, #freemelania-activism, and her enigmatic fashion rhetoric (remember that jacket?) fueled it further. In this thicket of celebrity politics, Jordan, a journalist for the *Washington Post*, positions her biographical-cum-muckraking book. Jordan argues that Melania is neither caged princess nor shallow model; rather the Trumps work together, sometimes through opposite strategies, but mostly through "mirror[ing] each other" in their own "deal" (28). While this sounds like an equal partnership, Jordan reserves little feminist uplift for Melania. Instead, she wonders if a former model is fit to be first lady, since she failed to "[see] the irony" (158). Jordan frames Melania's trajectory as the "ride of her life" (113), "highly improbable" (45), and "most unconventional" (47). While she cannot believe Melania's story, she also describes her public persona as "ghost," "hologram," and "woman with no history" (26, 27) who "compartmentalizes her life" (171).

The Art of Her Deal professes investigative journalism, but it reiterates what Katharina Wiedlack has called the othering of Melania Trump as "white non-feminist Eastern European woman" (1063). Yet Jordan's othering is subtler than *Saturday Night Live's* parody, since she fails to call out interviewers who patronize Melania or mock her language skills (201-04), and she foregrounds scenes where Melania posed as sexy model and/or was ridiculed (89-92, 132-37, 140-44). The story pivots on a lavishly staged citizenship scandal (187-97), when Jordan reveals Melania's dual citizenship ("very unusual for members of the first family," [192]) and quotes the State Department, cautioning about conflicting "obligations" (192-93).

Added to the paranoia of Eastern European infiltration is Melania's unsentimental "dealmaking"-approach to her job as first lady: Jordan bemoans that with her delayed move to the White House, Melania refused the domestic labors, left the commander in chief on edge for months, and upset the gendered spheres of the White House, with Ivanka Trump proposing to rename the First Lady Office the "First Family Office" (37). However, Melania is not incapable: she hires personnel to make Donald comfortable (45).

Jordan's conclusion (spoiler alert!) has Melania find her stride in the global COVID-19 pandemic, when she took to care work and called for wearing masks. Melania's "deal" with Trump was "complicated," but as first lady, "she would make this deal her own" (282). Melania's business approach and conflicted national allegiance chip away at the sentimental allure of U.S. politics: she may have married one of the "kings of American capitalism" (176), but deal-making is not what Jordan has in mind for America's imaginary queen.

Jordan's narrative pits the "deal" metaphor against an implicit, desirable sentimental value attributed to the presidency. Her subject is Melania, but the frame of reference is her FLOTUS predecessor, Michelle. Essentially, the first lady role is a raced-gendered institution, as Megan Handau and Evelyn Simien have asserted: Michelle Obama's first Black first ladyship brought to the fore the persistent effects of controlling images of White womanhood exerted on any wife who comes to this task (484). Obama's image building

as political partner is tethered to a romantic display of their marriage; their first date has actually been transformed into the rom-com *Southside with You* (2016). Against this idealized portrayal, Tammy Vigil argues, the Trump marriage appears as retrograde paternalism or “business arrangement” (48). Vigil describes the first lady’s task as a mission impossible of creating bonds of “consubstantiality with the public” (65), a feeling of physical proximity and of spiritual presence. The magic of consubstantiality casts the first lady as a pan-national mother figure, charged with the symbolic care work of heteronormative romance and supportive partnership. This problematic image of FLOTUS has traveled across the Atlantic. During public lectures on first ladies in the last years, I heard many stereotypes reiterated by audiences who decried Melania Trump as trophy wife and sympathized with Michelle Obama’s embodied rhetoric (see Schäfer).

It also seems that the sentimental separate spheres narrative is here to stay: Following her tenure as first lady, Michelle Obama keeps on building her public persona as model celebrity caretaker in a plethora of media: her autobiography *Becoming*, released in November 2018, was followed by *Becoming: A Guided Journal*, a Netflix documentary, and a Spotify podcast, produced by the Obamas’ production company Higher Ground. *Becoming* caps off the books reviewed here as the pinnacle of celebrity politics, despite itself: it hinges on Obama’s slogan that “You know I hate politics” (repeated in her 2020 DNC speech and Barack Obama’s *A Promised Land* [70]). Her celebrity labor is obviously gendered: She does the emotional outreach, while Barack frames his political legacy in more presidential terms. By professing to address personal growth, *not* politics, *Becoming* and its spinoffs exercise consubstantiality: Obama becomes a spectral presence on our bookshelves, TVs, social media profiles—she is only ever a click away. Thanks to their post-presidency PR, the Obamas have become “global supercelebrities” (Kellner), personas that enhance and complement each other in a Black power couple narrative.

Becoming is the perfect American autobiography. Its structure reiterates the genre and updates it to contemporary political topics, identity questions, and narrative patterns. It fits Obama’s life story into the hyperbole of U.S. exceptionalism, juggles relatability and stardom, and calls for imitation with its emphasis on voice and joining in that great chorus of American democracy. In the vein of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791), Obama casts herself as *exemplum*, translating his famous 13 virtues into a subtler recipe for being or becoming like her: find the “value in your story, in my story, in the larger story of our country” (xi).

The preface locates Obama in the “here and now” of post-presidency, when she finally has time to “reflect” (xiii) while making toast. In an intimate moment of individual re-assembly, she projects “life after the White House” (xiii), coupling the mundane with the transcendental moment that kicks off her post-presidency self. The smell of melting cheese is rivaled by another, even more auspicious perfume: “The air smelled like spring” (xii). Obama evokes sensual knowledges in her reader and makes her story synaesthetically palatable.

Obama tells her story in three sections (a classical choice for any storytelling) that meander between the self and its transcendence, between her life story and the marriage that brought her to the White House: (1) “Becoming Me,” (2) “Becoming Us,” (3) “Becoming More.” The second part ends with Barack’s election as first Black president of a nation built on slavery and structural racism, sending a message across the land “that change was really possible” (249). *Becoming*’s structure and rhetoric of rejuvenation (tethered

to Obama's celebrated ageless beauty) strikes that imaginary chord between Americans and their national fantasy. It replays the American jeremiad for both individual and nation, since "change" was achieved through elections (and Obama makes no mention of the electoral college, that unreformed crutch the world's oldest democracy leans on). *Becoming* serves as a self-help book, as a guide for rediscovering the magic of the United States, and as a vehicle for Obama's husband's politics. It might well be called the first Black first lady's political auto-ethnography.

To me, the most striking metaphor in this carefully crafted narrative is the reference to the nation's futurity via children. Their innocence forges relatability and convivial joy; they "crack me up and fill me with hope" (x). The second part, "Becoming More," ends with Michelle's campaign trail experience: on Independence Day 2007, she remembers the birth of their first daughter ten years before as the "most significant threshold we'd crossed" (254). Michelle's narrative links individual care work (becoming parents) to applying for the presidential role of national caretakers. For Michelle, this meant retrograding to "full time mother and wife" (254). Obama's futurism spells out the paternalism of the Obama marriage. While she often talks about the difficulties of "having it all," the ultimate weight of nation-building is loaded once more on women's shoulders. Her care work as first lady benefits her own children and the nation, as the hugging photos in *Becoming* illustrate, with the caption "A hug, for me, is a way to melt away pretenses and simply connect" (n.pag.). *Becoming* thus reaches out to, across, and for Obama's readers in a dazzling embrace of patriarchy.

The Obama's futurism forms an antidote for the retrotopic gesturing in Trump's "Make America Great Again" antics. Their legacy fuses U.S. political culture with the everyday, as they stay with us, as supporters of President Joe Biden, and as relatable visionaries imploring us to keep working for "change." Meanwhile, "Trumpism" is also here to stay—if we believe Stephen Shapiro, Trump's own hints at a re-run, or rumors that Ivanka Trump might throw her hat in the ring. For American Studies scholars and academic readers, the age of celebrity politics brings a host of new questions and research agendas.

STEFANIE SCHÄFER (Universität Wien)

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