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# Speaking for the youth, speaking for the planet: Greta Thunberg and the representational politics of eco-celebrity

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## ABSTRACT

Greta Thunberg is the world's best-known environmental activist. She has been covered by the international press, featured on television talk shows, presented in music videos, and been the object of social media memes – a visibility that has made her a global celebrity. But unlike other public figures whose stardom is attached to, rather than driven by environmental activism, Thunberg's eco-celebrity is anchored to her role in starting a *global* climate movement. Her activism is youth-centric and her eco-politics highly confrontational. Focusing on English language media from around the world, this essay explores how Thunberg's rise to global eco-celebrity has been media-centric while still being remarkably resistant to co-optation within the broader terrain of climate change politics. Emphasis is placed on how Thunberg has used her celebrity status to take aim at the material realities and social practices that have caused the climate crisis, and push for radical and immediate change.

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Greta Thunberg is perhaps the world's best-known environmental activist. Not only was she named *Time Magazine's* 2019 "Person of the Year," but she has been covered by the international press, featured on talk shows, presented in music videos, and been the object of social media memes. This visibility that has made her an international celebrity, a status has been shaped and framed via the recognition she's received from other public figures and interest groups, earning praise from presidents, royalty and Hollywood stars, hanging out with fellow environmental activist Vandana Shiva, and marching with First Nations Indigenous peoples. She's even been on the receiving end of scornful tweets by former US President Donald Trump. But unlike other public figures whose stardom was attached to, rather than driven by environmental activism (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio, Gisele Bündchen, Sting), Thunberg's rise as an eco-celebrity is tied directly to her role in starting *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* (School Strike for Climate) – a global, youth-based climate movement that generated the largest environmental demonstrations in human history.

In this essay, I argue that Thunberg is the "ideal performer" (Chouliaraki, 2013) for a youth-centered climate movement in that her meteoric rise to global eco-celebrity has been media-centric while still being remarkably resistant to co-optation within the broader terrain of climate change politics. Indeed, in many ways she represents a new kind of celebrity

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conservationist who breaks from the individualistic and promotional hypocrisies typical of most eco-celebrities even as she is enmeshed in the same system of representational politics that create them. The 18-year-old Swede's activism is unabashedly youth-centric, and she speaks for the Earth in climate science-driven terms. Her eco-politics are squarely focused on taking aim at the material realities and social practices that have caused the climate crisis, and the strikes are a mechanism to push for radical and immediate change. She rejects the prevailing economic order and directly confronts those who represent it, explicitly holding the older generation responsible for its failure to move the world toward low carbon societies despite having recognized the scope and depth of global warming.

Focusing on the “discursive intertextual chains” (Fairclough, 1995) circulated by English language news and current affairs media from around the world, I explore how Thunberg has achieved global celebrity status despite being what *Time* magazine described as “an ordinary teenage girl.” Emphasis is placed on how her celebrity is a product of the dialectical and constitutive nature of these dynamic mediascapes; that is, how media coverage across a range of platforms has transformed and been embedded in subsequent texts, elevating her as an eco-celebrity pushing for radical environmental reform even as many prominent voices and powerful media institutions have tried to diminish her status. Within this interpretive framework, attention is also given to Thunberg's tactical and strategic use of media, and how – deliberately or not – these have rendered her as a “non–nation state actor” (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009) giving her a prominent place in the public conversation about climate change. This includes how, through coverage of her international speeches and travel, statements by and relationships with other public figures, and her promotion of the voices of other climate change activists, Thunberg's combination of confrontational rhetoric, committed activism, lifestyles choices and public persona (e.g., the “ordinary school girl” of humble origins with Asperger's syndrome), connects her to some of the more foundational tropes and premises of environmentalism (apocalypticism, ecological jeremiad, importance of science).

## **Celebrities, environmentalism and media representation**

In the seminal book, *Celebrity and the environment*, Brockington (2009) asserts that on a global scale one of the main reasons that we have seen the rise of environmental celebrities is because their emergence is tied to the growth of conservationism around world at the same time as the exponential expansion of corporate capitalism. Within this context, commercial media serve as discourse rendering institutions, promoting “the pursuit if wasteful cultural practices and ecologically unsustainable lifestyles” even as they present audiences with “environmentally progressive themes” (Murphy, 2017). These discursive arrangements can foster a sense that reacting to climate change is a question of individualized responses – e.g., adopting a “consumer citizen” approach to environmental citizenship (Boykoff, Goodman, & Curtis, 2010, pp. 138-139). In essence, the public is encouraged to save the whales even as it is invited to eat all of the fish. As highly visible actors within these consumer-centered mediascapes, celebrity environmentalists are often merely commodified extensions of commercial conservation strategies. As Meister (2015) puts it, celebrities “do not try to save the world, but rather remake it by participating in global production, circulation and consumption” (p. 284). This has led to charges of hypocrisy, which is at its core, “an accusation of inconsistency

of celebrity endorsed environmentalism and the structural nature of neoliberal economic systems” (p. 285).

To appreciate this inconsistent and compromised role, Craig (2019) contends that celebrity must be understood as a convergence of representational and promotional power of the media, and is expressed in two ways. First, celebrities derive representational power through textual (images and stories) and social (relationship to others, e.g., audiences and publics) articulations. These articulations “embody and give public expression to values, styles, and pleasures” (p. 779). Second, as products of media and promotional industries, celebrities are commodities, as well as “agents in the production of a commercial culture that is increasingly oriented around promotion” (p. 779). In fact, most activist celebrities now deliberately invest in this commodification, “branding” their activism through integrated, multiplatform media models that can involve a combination of campaigns, media events, films or TV programs they produce, press coverage they seek, websites they create, and social media they use (Huggan, 2013; Rojek, 2012). This investment is designed to connect and even interact with, the public. Celebrities thus perform functions of advocacy while seeking legitimacy, allowing them to “capture the embodiment of a concern about a certain issue” (Craig, 2019, p. 780).

Be the cause environmental or other, this connection to “concern” is tied to the rise of celebrity humanitarianism, which Chouliaraki (2013) observes is a relatively recent development involving shifting celebrity from a “powerless elite” to an official communication strategy of government and non-governmental organizations and major private initiatives. According to Chouliaraki, celebrity humanitarianism’s elevated place within the global public sphere has unfolded through three interrelated dynamics: 1) The decline of public trust in bureaucratic institutions, 2) The expansion of the fields of social marketing and show business into politics, and 3) The shifting policy priorities in humanitarian institutions toward corporate models of communication (p.78). From this (new) position of power, celebrities are imbued with the expertise to articulate moral discourses that “massively touch our hearts and minds” (p. 79). Nevertheless, it is through this elevated status of elite power – e.g., “the ideal performer” – that celebrity also “brings into focus the inherent theatricality of humanitarianism as an arrangement of separation between those who watch at a distance and those who act” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 80). In many cases, this involves the celebrity acting as a “bridge between a (Western) audience and a faraway tragedy” (de Waal, 2008 p. 44), implicating an underlying connection to Eurocentric imaginaries (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

With regard to environmentalism, this position of performative power is important to understand. First, because celebrities have become significant “non-nation state figures in the discursive, material and media politics surrounding climate change” they are much more than just “distractions” and possess real power (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009, p. 396). Second, as a form of representational politics, celebrity endorsement of environmental causes demonstrates “the power of representations of nature and the authority of representation over experience” (Brockington, 2008, p. 553). That is, celebrities are granted the power to speak for nature, or at least a vision of a fragile ecosystem or environmental cause that they take up as their own. This allows them to be associated with goals that are not necessarily rooted in people’s everyday realities but rather their environmental imagination.

There is, of course, a long list of popular culture celebrities from around the world that scholars can consider when analyzing eco-celebrity (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio, Gisele

Bündchen, Cate Blanchett, Amitabh Bachchan, Jackie Chan). What of these “celanthropists”—the celebrity who voluntarily participates in humanitarian fundraising, publicity awareness and charity building (Rojek, 2012, p. 67) – have in common is that all have leveraged the social capital of their celebrity to increase the visibility and importance of an environmental issue and/or serve as the voice of an environmental advocacy group. Yet this representational privilege has also left them vulnerable to criticism, particularly along the lines of their “inauthenticity” (e.g., not being an expert) or the “constructedness” of their environmental politics (Turner, 2016). As Turner (2016) asserts, the celanthropist is almost always a compromised figure, as their motives are suspect and cause seen as self-serving even if philanthropic, so their commitment to or understanding of a cause treated with skepticism (p. 812). In this respect celebrity power has its limits as it is defined in part by the fact that celanthropists are sometimes seen as “unwelcomed interventionists” (p. 813).

What makes Greta Thunberg different from “A-list” celanthropists is that she did not leverage a preexisting status as celebrity to confront a particular environmental problem or align herself with a particular group. Rather, her ascent to celebrity has been the direct result of her environmental activism. She is what scholars have labeled a “celebrity conservationist” (Brockington, 2008, 2009; Huggan, 2013) and can be understood more in the tradition of Jacques-Yves Cousteau or David Attenborough than DiCaprio or Bündchen. But she is also fundamentally different from these examples in several important ways. First, contrary to the celebrity conservationists’ practice of giving “their audiences the satisfaction of watching them actually being there in real wild places and interacting with real wildlife” (Brockington, 2008, p. 562), Thunberg’s appeal is derived from her Friday climate strikes in front of city hall, confrontational speeches at international summits, sober television studio interviews, or online grappling with critics. Second, rather than limiting her celebrity power, Thunberg’s capacity to attract derision, especially from powerful figures, has actually fueled her celebrity status. Through these two distinctions she has developed an environmental politics of performance *for* the natural world, rather than *in* the natural world.

### The celebrity who wasn’t

One of the defining aspects of Greta Thunberg’s rise to eco-celebrity is how it has been anchored in media narratives of how she is ordinary yet transformative. The BBC News wrote, “Greta Thunberg is a Swedish teenager who skipped school and inspired an international movement to fight climate change.” In a *The Rolling Stone* feature story, Thunberg is framed by “How one Swedish teenager armed with a homemade sign ignited a crusade and became the leader of a movement” (Rodrick, 2020). In *Wired* magazine she is described as a “messiah with a side braid” (Ellis, 2019). *Forbes* offered, “(b)efore she became a household name, the teenager started a school strike that has now lasted more than 2 years. She wasn’t part of any lobbying group and wasn’t a mouthpiece for any professional organization at the time. She was just a kid with an idea” (Brandon, 2020). And in *Time*, Thunberg is presented as “an ordinary teenage girl who, in summoning the courage to speak truth to power, became the icon of a generation” (Alter, Haynes, & Worland, 2019). These renderings of her rise to celebrity conservationist juxtapose the simple schoolgirl origins with the exceptionalism of her ascent. Thunberg’s journey is thus a central feature of her

representational power, giving her activism “authentic” resonance by grounding it in humble origins.

Most mainstream media accounts trace that journey back to an environmental awakening triggered through an experience at school. The condensed version of her story, as presented rather cryptically by Britain’s *The Sunday Times* reads like a film trailer:

A girl who would be born in Sweden in 2003; who would first hear about climate change when she was eight; who would find this revelation so horrifying that she would descend into a year-long depression; who would be diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome; who would renounce air travel and overconsumption and animal products; who would leave school to strike outside the Swedish parliament to demand more political action; and who has now, just one year later, become one of the most powerful environmental activists in the world. (Hartford, 2019)

In a very short period of time, Greta’s *Skolstrejk för klimatet* went from a party of one (Thunberg) to school strikes around Europe, then to tens of thousands around the world. By September 2019 her strikes had grown exponentially, generating what has been estimated to be the largest environmental demonstrations in human history (Barclay & Resnick, 2019). Unlike most environmental activists, Greta did not adhere to the notion that we are all responsible for the climate crisis. Rather, she blames the older generation for its inaction and complicity, and the strikes were designed to call out this inaction while motivating other youth to confront the existential threat of climate change.

Reportedly, the idea to strike was inspired by the Parkland students, who walked out of school in protest of Florida gun laws that enabled a massacre at their school (Watts, 2019). Parkland students also presented Thunberg with an example for using social media to draw attention to a cause (Ellis, 2019). As developed further below, she has built on this blueprint and expanded participation in her climate strike movement “Fridays for Future” through a combination of continuing activism, accessibility to the press, focus on and repetition of core facts and ideas, skillful use of media to hold the powerful accountable, making the right friends (and enemies), ecocentric lifestyle choices, and sharing the spotlight with others.

## Thunberg and the global media

A survey of Thunberg’s place within today’s global media landscape is a study in not only representation politics and practices, but of the interlaced and mutually constitutive logics of journalism, commercial entertainment, and social media. In addition to being selected as *Time*’s 2019 Person of the Year, she has been covered by the international press (e.g., CNN, Fox News, Al Jazeera, NPR, *The Times of India*, *The South African*, *The Jakarta Post*, *The Japan Times*, *The Portugal News*, *The Guardian*), invited to highly rated talk shows (e.g., *Ellen*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*), featured on everything from *Democracy Now!* to *Access Hollywood*, and even landed on the covers of the *Wired* and British *GQ*. She’s also inspired a Paris fashion week, co-wrote a song about climate change with the band The 1975, and starred as a crystal ball reading psychic in Pearl Jam’s music video about climate change, *Retrograde*. Most recently, the BBC announced the creation of a new TV series about climate change activism featuring Thunberg.

Within this international mediascape, much has been made of Greta’s global travel and modes of transportation. Her trips by train and subway use have received ample coverage, but it was her zero emissions journey via the high-tech yacht *La Vagabonde* across the

Atlantic and back again that received the most attention (e.g., Germanos, 2019; *The Portugal News*, 2019). She also famously borrowed a Tesla from Arnold Schwarzenegger to drive to across the US (Bryant, 2019). On *The Daily Show*, Thunberg spoke about her decision to adopt eco-conscious travel: “I have, since a few years, stopped flying because of the enormous impact that aviation has on the climate. And to make a stand. I am one of the very few people in the world who can actually do such a trip, so I thought, why not?” (*The Daily Show*, 2019). Other eco-warrior celebrities have received scrutiny for their travels, such as Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio, both of whom were criticized for the hypocrisy of using air travel to attend climate summits where progressive policies to curb carbon outputs were discussed. Anticipating this kind of surveillance, Thunberg has very consciously modeled low emissions travel, a decision that been credited with creating the “Greta Effect” – a no-fly movement that has inspired individuals and even businesses to establish carbon offset practices (The Greta Thunberg Effect, 2019).

Thunberg’s sensitivity to issues of voice and context has become one of the defining aspects of her profile, and in 2020 led to a wave of articles about “the other” youth environmental activists. In what could be called “the other Greta Effect,” CNN, ABC News, BBC News Mundo, *The Guardian*, and *National Geographic* have all featured stories about different young environmental activists from around the globe, many of whom have been working for change long before Greta. This sudden interest was triggered after Uganda environmental activism Vanessa Nakate, the only black person and only African in a photo shoot, was cropped out of an AP Press photo which showed only the four white activists, including Thunberg (Branchereau, 2020). Not long afterward Thunberg held a press conference at the Greenpeace Sweden office featuring fellow eco-activists from Kenya, Uganda and South Africa to address the invisibility of African climate activists. To extend her efforts to cultivate a more diverse, global approach to climate crisis coverage by the press, Thunberg also developed a web series, Talks for Future (#TalksForFuture!) to recognize the work of youth climate activists from the Global South and indigenous communities. Streamed live on Fridays via Instagram and Facebook, and archived on YouTube, these “international webinars” have already tackled issues ranging from indigenous environmental rights and climate change’s impact on rising seas – topics that get fleeting attention by the mainstream press.

All of this coverage has taken place in a period of just over 2 years.

### **Greta’s “superpower” and the climate crisis**

In addition to the exponential force of these intertextual chains and activities, one of the most important reasons that Greta has excelled in the media spotlight is that she has an exceptional capacity to remain focused. Indeed, a characteristic of Thunberg’s public persona commented on by journalists is her extraordinary ability to stay on point when others attempt flattery or to personalize her crusade. *Rolling Stone* writer Stephen Rodrick observed that, when a prominent magazine editor asked her about how “she dealt with all the haters,” Greta responded by saying “I would like to say something that I think people need to know more than how I deal with haters,” and then launched into “details from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s latest report” (Rodrick, 2020)

Greta has Asperger’s syndrome, which she self-describes as a “superpower” that allows her to “think differently.” According to *Time*, “she doesn’t operate on the same emotional

register as many of the people she meets. She dislikes crowds; ignores small talk; and speaks in direct, uncomplicated sentences. She cannot be flattered or distracted. She is not impressed by other people's celebrity, nor does she seem to have interest in her own growing fame" (Alter, Haynes, & Worland, 2020). *The Guardian* columnist Jonathan Watts (2019) asserts that Thunberg has "weaponized" this superpower for meetings with political leaders and billionaire entrepreneurs, which is given form via her capacity to put things into immediate, apocalyptic terms. In her speech at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York City, she said, "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!" She echoed this sentiment during *The Daily Show* interview, albeit in a gentler yet no less urgent way: "But (people) don't understand how severe this crisis actually is . . . We are right now in the beginning of a sixth mass extinction, and people don't know these things."

Thunberg's evocation of tropes of "extinction," "collapse," and "climate crisis" (over "climate change") in her public addresses and interviews are an effective means through which to evoke the cultural resonance of environmental apocalypticism. Apocalypticism is grounded in "sensibilities of loss, fear, and imaginings of doom" (Lewis, 2012, p. 13), and has long been a defining metaphor in mainstream environmentalism, persisting today in a broad range of commercial entertainment and popular culture around the world (Branston, 2016; Garrard, 2004). Greta's deployment of this rhetorical tool kit is a means to push back on frames that lack sufficient urgency or implicitly support the existing economic and political status quo – something that she clearly sees as untenable.

Complementary to her use of apocalyptic tropes, and one of her primary strategies for having her message heard about the climate crisis is repetition. "Where others speak the language of hope, Thunberg repeats the unassailable science: Oceans will rise. Cities will flood. Millions of people will suffer" (Alter, Haynes, & Worland, 2019). She has repeated on many occasions that the climate change crisis is not treated as a crisis, and she is especially impatient with narratives that present it as solvable via convenient adjustments tied to current models of growth and sustainability. For instance, in a recent interview on *The Late Show with Steve Colbert*, Colbert asked her about why she and other activists had decided to publish an open letter to EU leaders, who had consistently failed to address climate change in their future economic plans. She responded,

To tell them . . . you need to stop pretending that we can solve this within today's system, and you need to start treating the climate crisis like a crisis, because if we don't treat it like a crisis, we won't be able to solve it . . . And to say to them that we are no longer going to play your game on your terms, because this is crisis, and this is a matter of life and death for so many people (Brandon, 2020).

In addition to her rhetorical skills, Thunberg has become very adept at using different media platforms to magnify her message and manage her image. She's used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to post photos of herself at Standing Rock Reservation (North Dakota), with other teen climate activists, with rescue dogs, etc. She's also trolled critics, advocated for veganism, and encouraged followers to sign environmental petitions and support social justice causes.

Not surprisingly she is also often the object of material echoed through social media. *Wired* wrote, "she makes faces that beg to be memed" (Ellis, 2019). Case in point is the now



famous “stare down” video of her looking at the climate change denier Donald Trump while he passes her at the United Nations in New York on the morning on the morning of Sept. 23, 2019. The video, which immediately went viral, was describe by *The New York Times Magazine* as, “a complete narrative, a story told so deftly – with such faithfulness to Aristotelian dramatic principles and so sure a command of cinematic clichés – that it’s hard to believe that it wasn’t cooked up in Hollywood” (Rosen, 2019).

Clips from the video have become a social media meme, with many observers projecting an underlying battle of morality, juxtaposing the small but mighty defender of the planet against the lumbering monstrosity of the status quo who is committed to the limitless pillaging of the earth. The meme also produced slogans like “Make America Greta Again” (Prance, 2019), which subsequently became the title of a *Wired* documentary about Greta. Other Greta memes include, “How dare you!” “I want you to panic,” and “Our house is on fire” – lines from her public addresses at the UN, World Economic Forum and elsewhere, the last of these which was produced as a commercial by Fridays for Future featuring a family ignoring their home going up in flames as they blindly attend to their daily routine (Fridays for Future, 2020). One Thunberg meme even casts her as a time traveler who’s trying to save the planet (Common Dreams, 2019), a story that was picked up by the TV gossip program *Access Hollywood*.

In addition to this digital presence, Thunberg has also used legacy media to continue her activism into the pandemic, and even expose hypocrisy. During a Swedish radio broadcast in June 2020 she complained about how high-ranking figures have tried to earn points with an eco-curious public by seeking photo opts with her at public events.

Presidents, prime ministers, kings and princesses came and wanted to talk to me. They saw me and suddenly saw the chance that they could take a photo with me for their Instagram account . . . . It seemed as if they had forgotten for a moment to be ashamed that their generation had let future generations down. (*The Guardian*, June 27, 2020)

Through this apparent refusal to fall prey to her own celebrity and lose focus, she has also been largely effective in using mainstream media opportunities and social media tools to stay with key talking points and direct attention to the climate crisis. This combination of media savvy and narrative focus is important because it has allowed her cultivate a message that is consistently in line with “Change the system, not the climate” calls that reverberate in most youth-based climate activism, targeting business as usual economic growth and related social policies (O’Brien, Selboe, & Hayward, 2018). As such, Thunberg departs from the kind of promotional exercises that typically define celebrity endorsements as a matter of impression management (e.g., a celebrity’s narrow association with a safe issue that has corporate backing) (Brockington, 2009). Yet neither is the “epideictic role” (the articulation of society’s moral and ethical beliefs) (Meister, 2015, p. 286) that she plays anchored to her proximity to the nature world. Rather, it is defined through her moral outrage at society’s environmental inaction, particularly in generational terms.

### **Celebrity endorsements and critics**

Thunberg’s capacity to steer the narrative about her activism does not mean that she is not also implicated in impression management. In fact, she is deeply invested in it, and based on her social media activities, quite deliberate about how she goes about cultivating her image.

Her celebrity endorsers include a diverse international mix, from Leonardo DiCaprio to Malala Yousafzai to the Pope. Significantly, Greta has also been endorsed and even defended by other famous eco-activists and ecologically minded politicians, as well as embraced by environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK and proponents of The Green New Deal in the US. These associations underscore that a key aspect of the representational power of her celebrity is her association with other celebrities (Craig, 2019), as these associations have helped amplify her message, broaden her public, and in many ways, serve as a barometer of her impact.

One of the more interesting dynamics in these celebrity endorsement exercises is how Greta has caused action and reflection by even some of the world's most established environmental activists. Channeling Thunberg's success in mobilizing teens to participate in her *Skolstrejk för klimatet*, climate change author and activist Bill McKibben challenged a crowd comprised of adults to take similar action: "It was our parents' and grandparents' generation who faced the crisis of fascism in Europe. We are in an existential emergency of the same kind, so staying away from work for a day and organizing is not too much to ask" (Green, 2019). Arguably the greatest praise came from climate guru Al Gore, who in an interview for the *Rolling Stone* feature story about Thunberg, reflected,

The phrase 'A little child shall lead them' has come to mind more than once. She said to the assembled world leaders, 'You say you understand the science, but I don't believe you. Because if you did and then you continue to act as you do, that would mean you're evil. And I don't believe that.' Wow. There have been other times in human history when the moment a morally-based social movement reached the tipping point was the moment when the younger generation made it their own. Here we are. (Rodrick, 2020)

Gore's framing of Thunberg in biblical terms elevates her to jeremiadic status, underscoring her resonance even among the high priests of environmentalism. More broadly, that celebrity activists and activist celebrities alike admire, support and even emulate Greta provides her with immense cultural currency in the public sphere, further legitimizing and magnifying her status along the lines of celebrity representational politics described earlier (e.g., values, styles, pleasures) (Craig, 2019; see also Chouliaraki, 2013; Huggan, 2013). Thunberg has embraced these endorsements and used the exposure to keep the media focused on the climate crisis. Yet her interactions with the celebrity activists and activist celebrities have also caused some to reassert their own eco-activism.

Possibly even more indicative of her growing celebrity influence has been her capacity to collect numerous high-powered critics in a very short period of time. These include, more broadly, the conservative press, and more specifically, former US President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro, and a host of other politicians and pundits. Among these her motives have been suspect and, as Turner (2016) has observed that is often the case with celebrities, her activities framed as unwelcomed interventions or unrepresentative impositions.

The negative response to Thunberg has been particularly fierce in countries where climate change is still debated as a matter of one's beliefs. In the UK, *The Spectator's* Iain Martin wrote, "On what basis can someone claim to speak for future generations? Was there a vote? How? Radical Green religion looks post-democratic" (Warren, 2019). In Australia, Thunberg was called a "deeply disturbed messiah of the global warming movement" and the "priest of a cult" by *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt, who added, "I

have never seen a girl so young and with so many mental disorders treated by so many adults as a guru” (Bolt, 2019). According to global media scholars Maxwell and Miller (2019), other Rupert Murdoch media have followed suit, even seeding the conspiracy theory that Greta “may be ‘a schoolgirl puppet controlled by more sinister forces.’” In the US, Fox news pundits have referred to Thunberg as a “mentally ill Swedish child” and compared her to children in the Stephen King horror film “Children of the Corn,” which centered on Christian fundamentalist children who ritually murder all the adults in their small town (Baragona, 2019).

Donald Trump has displayed an especially odd level of discomfort with the attention that Thunberg has received. In response to Thunberg’s impassioned address at the UN, Trump sarcastically trolled: “Seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!” (@realDonaldTrump, Sept. 23, 2019). Later, he was reportedly incensed that *Time* selected her as the 2019 “Person on the Year” (an award that he won 2016), and tweeted, “So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” (Wamsley, 2019).

Drawing lessons the Parkland student examples, Thunberg has become exceptionally skilled at “clapping back” at her critics. She mockingly responded to Trump, updating her Twitter bio to read: “A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend.” Only days before she reacted to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who called her a “brat,” by revising her Twitter bio to read “Pirralha” – the translation of “brat” into Portuguese (Reilly, 2019). Bolsonaro was upset because Thunberg had posted a video about Indigenous leaders being assassinated for defending the Amazon. Another example involved U.S. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, who smugly told the teenage climate activists to study economics before talking about sustainable policies. Greta tweeted back with, “it doesn’t take a college degree in economics to realise that our remaining 1.5° carbon budget and ongoing fossil fuel subsidies and investments don’t add up.” She also hit back at the *Sun Herald’s* Holt with the tweet, “I am indeed ‘deeply disturbed’ about the fact that these hate and conspiracy campaigns are allowed to go on and on and on just because we children communicate and act on the science. Where are the adults?” (Collett, 2019).

In addition to these examples of sparring with these more powerful voices, she even took the trouble to react to a *Daily Mail* interview with rock star Meat Loaf, who asserted that Greta has been “brainwashed into thinking that there is climate change and there isn’t” (Aviles, 2020). In response, Thunberg soberly refocused the interview, tweeting “It’s not about Meatloaf, It’s not about what some people call me. It’s not about left or right. It’s all about scientific facts . . . Unless we start to focus everything on this, our targets will soon be out of reach.” To illustrate her point, she attached a Carbon Brief graph showing the target emission drop needed by 2027.

There have been, of course, a slew of other critics. Anticipating the need to take more control over the narrative, Thunberg posted a long statement she crafted on her Facebook account on Feb. 2, 2019. What follows is a condensed version featuring key parts:

Many people love to spread rumors saying that I have people ‘behind me’ or that I’m being ‘paid’ or ‘used’ . . . But there is no one ‘behind’ me except for myself . . . I am not part of any organization. . . . I am absolutely independent and I only represent myself. And yes, I write my

own speeches. But since I know that what I say is going to reach many, many people I often ask for input . . . . And I do what I do completely for free . . . I am just a messenger, . . . I am just saying what scientists have repeatedly said for decades. (Thunberg, 2019)

As these interactions show, Thunberg demonstrates an advanced capacity to tactically redirect criticism back at her critics – ironically a skill that often makes her sound like the adult in these exchanges. More significantly still is how she is able to turn even the worst criticism into strategic opportunities to focus once again on the bigger fight: the climate crisis. The most powerful example of this was her reaction to a highly disturbing cartoon depicting her sexual assault, which was printed on bumper stickers circulated among Canadian oil workers. Thunberg countered with a simple but deliberate response via Twitter: “They are starting to get more and more desperate . . . This shows that we’re winning” (Sjoberg, 2020).

## Conclusions

Environmental celebrity scholars Goodman and Littler (2013) suggest that, “with its individualized mode of power, its concentration of wealth, its imbrication in systemic profit-making, celebrity might be the exact opposite of what biodiversity and the environmental crisis needs: participation, co-operation, regulation against exploitation and systemic political change?” (p. 269). But as Thunberg’s activities as an eco-celebrity show, it is clear that she *is* interested in policy, *is* interested in emission targets, *does* espouse collaboration, *does* challenge power, and overall, *is* dedicated to radical, systemic change in order to tackle the existential threat of the climate crisis. She is, therefore, a radically different kind of eco-celebrity.

Yet Thunberg’s connection to the natural world she is defending is less about narrow causes than it is a sort of controlled fury over its global degradation. Hers is a politics of youth-centered, righteous rage (“I want you to panic”) born on the imperative to act on the vulnerability of that which cannot speak—planet Earth. She reprimands the current generation on behalf of those who are inheriting the mess, speaking for the planet in scientific, action-oriented, uncompromising terms, which is precisely the quality that invites her followers to interpret her as authentic and credible and her critics to see her as hysterical or dangerous.

In many respects Thunberg is thus the “ideal performer” (Chouliaraki, 2013) for a contemporary youth-centered climate movement as she has played an important role as “non-nation state” actor (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009) within the cultural politics of climate change. While centered on her confrontational public addresses and climate strike-related activities, her eco-celebrity status has been shaped through exceptionally powerful and dynamic intertextual chains involving news coverage, entertainment fare, social media memes, and careful image management centered on message control and moral responsibility (e.g., choosing sustainable travel options; giving voice to others). Moreover, her performance as celebrity is neither hollow nor hypocritical and resists media co-optation, as it has a humble origin that sparked a movement, draws from and aligns with other activism, is filled with conviction, and animated by a “superpower” that entrenches the focus of climate change in science, urgency, and action. Because of this profile she eschews commodification, speaking for the world’s youth as she speaks for the planet.

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## Notes on contributor

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